

SLOW SCULPTURE



Volume XII: The Complete Stories of
THEODORE STURGEON

FOREWORD BY CONNIE WILLIS

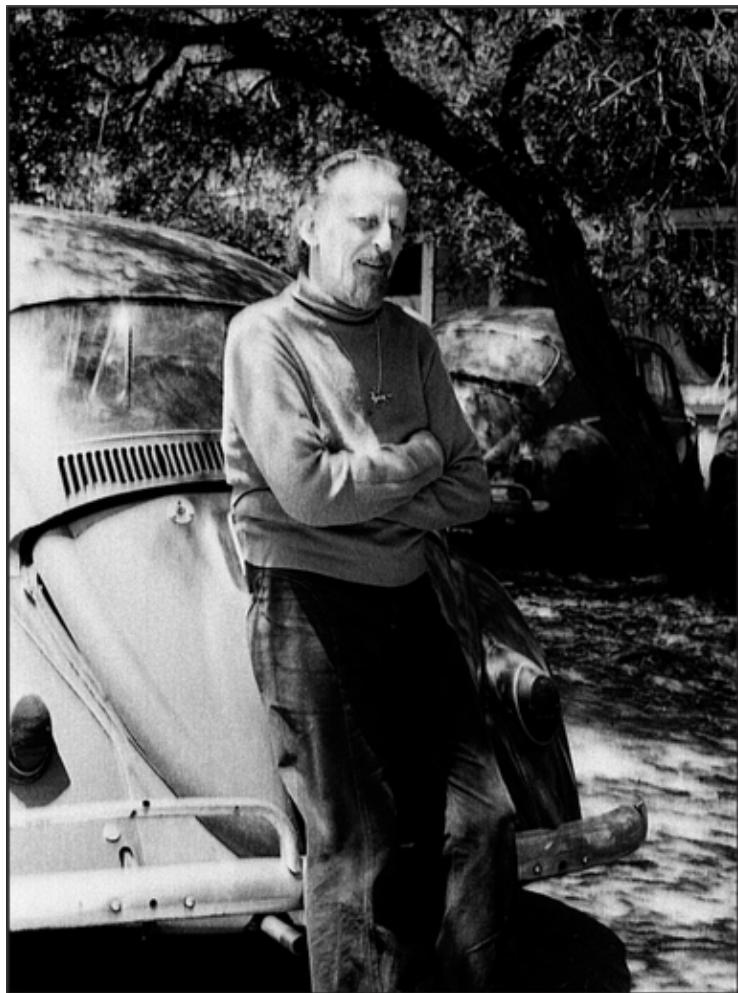


Photo by W. Sturgeon 1976, used with permission.

Theodore Sturgeon, in front of his 1964 VW bug with extra big wheels, at his Echo Park, Los Angeles home, 1976.

SLOW SCULPTURE

Volume XII:
The Complete Stories of
Theodore Sturgeon

Edited by
Noël Sturgeon

Foreword by
Connie Willis

Afterword by
Spider Robinson



North Atlantic Books
Berkeley, California

Copyright © 2009 by the Theodore Sturgeon Literary Trust; except for the afterword, copyright 1986 Spider Robinson, used by permission. Previously published materials © 1955, 1970, 1971, 1972 by Theodore Sturgeon, renewed by the Theodore Sturgeon Literary Trust. All rights reserved. No portion of this book, except for brief review, may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—with the written permission of the publisher. For information contact North Atlantic Books.

Published by
North Atlantic Books
P.O. Box 12327
Berkeley, California 94712

Cover photo collage design by Paula Morrison

Slow Sculpture: Volume XII of The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon is sponsored by the Society for the Study of Native Arts and Sciences, a nonprofit educational corporation whose goals are to develop an educational and cross-cultural perspective linking various scientific, social, and artistic fields; to nurture a holistic view of arts, sciences, humanities, and healing; and to publish and distribute literature on the relationship of mind, body, and nature.

North Atlantic Books' publications are available through most bookstores. For further information, visit our website at www.northatlanticbooks.com or call 800-733-3000.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the printed edition as follows:
Sturgeon, Theodore.

Slow sculpture / Theodore Sturgeon; edited by Noël Sturgeon; foreword by Connie Willis; afterword by Spider Robinson.

p. cm. — (The complete stories of Theodore Sturgeon; v. 12)
eISBN: 978-1-58394-756-2
1. Science fiction, American. I. Title.
PS3569.T875 A6 1994 vol. 12
813'.54—dc22

2009031693

v3.1

EDITOR'S NOTE

Theodore Hamilton Sturgeon was born February 26, 1918, and died May 8, 1985. This is the twelfth volume in a series that collects all of his short fiction. The last volume, *Why Dolphins Don't Bite*, will be published in 2010. The stories are mostly arranged chronologically by order of composition. With two exceptions ("The [Widget], the [Wadget], and Boff," 1955, and the previously unpublished "The Beholders," 1964), this volume contains stories written between 1970 and 1972, including the Hugo and Nebula Award-winning story, "Slow Sculpture."

My deepest thanks go to Paul Williams, editor of all the previous volumes. To have *all* of Sturgeon's stories published was Paul's personal vision, and his gentle persistence, hard work, and encyclopedic knowledge of Sturgeon made it happen. He started this project in 1991 and stayed with it until Alzheimer's from a brain injury made it impossible for him to continue. Though he could not contribute to this volume, I would like to dedicate it to him. My attempt at replicating his excellent story notes is sure to fall short of his stellar example. Those who wish to give back to him for his lifetime of important work (for the science fiction community in particular) should visit www.paulwilliams.com in order to help Paul and his family with his full-time care.

For their significant assistance in preparing this twelfth volume, I would like to thank Connie Willis, Spider Robinson, Debbie Notkin, Marion Sturgeon, Tandy Sturgeon, John Wolff, Tina Krauss, Elizabeth Kennedy, Philip Smith, Paula Morrison, Eric Weeks, William F. Seabrook, Hart Sturgeon-Reed, T.V. Reed, Chris Lotts of Ralph Vincinanza, Ltd., Vince Gerardis of CreatedBy, Lindy Hough, Richard Grossinger, Wina Sturgeon, Jayne Williams, and all of you who have expressed your support and interest.

Noël Sturgeon

Trustee, Theodore Sturgeon Literary Trust

(<http://www.physics.emory.edu/~weeks/sturgeon>)

BOOKS BY THEODORE STURGEON

Without Sorcery (1948)
The Dreaming Jewels [aka *The Synthetic Man*] (1950)
More Than Human (1953)
E Pluribus Unicorn (1953)
Caviar (1955)
A Way Home (1955)
The King and Four Queens (1956)
I, Libertine (1956)
A Touch of Strange (1958)
The Cosmic Rape [aka *To Marry Medusa*] (1958)
Aliens 4 (1959)
Venus Plus X (1960)
Beyond (1960)
Some of Your Blood (1961)
Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea (1961)
The Player on the Other Side (1963)
Sturgeon in Orbit (1964)
Starshine (1966)
The Rare Breed (1966)
Sturgeon Is Alive and Well ... (1971)
The Worlds of Theodore Sturgeon (1972)
Sturgeon's West (with Don Ward) (1973)
Case and the Dreamer (1974)
Visions and Venturers (1978)
Maturity (1979)
The Stars Are the Styx (1979)
The Golden Helix (1979)
Alien Cargo (1984)
Godbody (1986)
A Touch of Sturgeon (1987)
The [Widget], the [Wadget], and Boff (1989)
Argyll (1993)
Star Trek, The Joy Machine (with James Gunn) (1996)

THE COMPLETE STORIES SERIES

1. *The Ultimate Egoist* (1994)
2. *Microcosmic God* (1995)
3. *Killdozer!* (1996)
4. *Thunder and Roses* (1997)
5. *The Perfect Host* (1998)
6. *Baby Is Three* (1999)

7. *A Saucer of Loneliness* (2000)
8. *Bright Segment* (2002)
9. *And Now the News ...* (2003)
10. *The Man Who Lost the Sea* (2005)
11. *The Nail and the Oracle* (2007)
12. *Slow Sculpture* (2009)
13. *Case and the Dreamer* (2010)

CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Editor's Note

Other Books by This Author

Foreword:

Theodore Sturgeon and “The Man Who Lost the Sea”
by Connie Willis

The [Widget], the [Wadget], and Boff

The Beholders

It's You!

Slow Sculpture

The Girl Who Knew What They Meant

The Patterns of Dorne

Crate

Suicide

Uncle Fremmis

Necessary and Sufficient

The Verity File

Occam's Scalpel

Dazed

Pruzy's Pot

Afterword to “Pruzy's Pot” by Spider Robinson

[Story Notes by Noël Sturgeon](#)

[About Theodore Sturgeon](#)

FOREWORD

Theodore Sturgeon and “The Man Who Lost the Sea”: An Appreciation

Connie Willis

I read my first Theodore Sturgeon story when I was thirteen. It was “A Saucer of Loneliness,” and it was an extraordinary story. All Sturgeon stories are extraordinary, of course, but I didn’t know that then. I *did* know, however, that he was writing about different things than the other authors were in whatever anthology “Saucer” was in, about aliens who weren’t trying to invade and flying saucers that weren’t trying to attack, about longing and isolation and problems that can’t be solved.

That last was what impressed me most. So many of the science fiction stories I read firmly believed that any problem could be solved with ingenuity and determination. Sturgeon knew better.

He also knew that love is not the gooey, sentimental thing most people (and especially science fiction authors) think it is. He understood that love is problematic, dangerous, and even, at its most triumphant, ultimately tragic. And that it was just as legitimate a subject for serious consideration and scientific analysis as courage or gravity or death (and, in fact, held elements of all of those.)

And he wrote about these incredibly complicated things in a simple and eminently readable style, with no information dumps, no sermons, no indication of how difficult this was to do. Like Fred Astaire, Theodore Sturgeon made it look easy. So easy, in fact, that you weren’t really aware of just how good it was till long after, when you measured the story’s impact on you.

After that first encounter with Sturgeon, I began actively seeking out his stories. I found and read “Killdozer” and “The Hurkle is a Happy Beast” and “Memorial” and “The Comedian’s

Children” and dozens of others. My favorite was “And Now the News,” a troubling story about the constant bombardment of information we have to endure and its effect on us that I find more relevant now in our twittering-online-CNNed-hyperconnected-globalized world even than it was when I first read it.

But I also found “Slow Sculpture” and “The Other Man” and “The Nail and the Oracle.” And came to admire more and more Sturgeon’s skill and style and subtlety of thought with each story.

I was not the only one. Every science fiction writer I knew revered him as a consummate storyteller and someone whose stories had not only heart, but brains and depth. He was frequently discussed (I think only other writers, who know how hard all this stuff is to do and especially how difficult it is to make it look effortless, fully appreciate Sturgeon) and generally considered to be the best short story writer the field had ever produced.

It was during one of those discussions a few years ago that someone mentioned, “The Man Who Lost the Sea.” “I don’t think I’ve ever read that one,” I said innocently, and everyone in the group was horrified.

“Oh, my God, you’re kidding!” they said. “How can you have been in the field all this time and not have read it?”

It was as if I’d just confessed to being illiterate. And in a way, I had. Nobody who hasn’t read Sturgeon’s story can really understand what science fiction’s all about. And I’d never read it.

“You *have* to read it!” they said. “It’s amazing!”

“What’s it about?” I asked, but they refused to tell me.

“Just read it,” they said.

So I read it. And they were right. It’s his best story. I still love “And Now the News” and “A Saucer of Loneliness,” and “Memorial,” but “The Man Who Lost the Sea” is in a class by itself.

It starts off unassumingly enough with: “Say you’re a kid, and one dark night you’re running along the cold sand with this helicopter in your hand, saying very fast witchy-witchy-witchy”—a casual, conversational line that could be the opener of Robert A. Heinlein’s *Have Space Suit, Will Travel*.

But Sturgeon’s taking us to an entirely different place. Through seemingly random reminiscences and ordinary, familiar details—

Sputnik beeping overhead, a pestering kid, that time in gym class when you fell off the parallel bars, the crash of the surf—he's leading us straight into the heart of darkness.

No, that's not right. It's not a straightforward journey at all. The first time I read "The Man Who Lost the Sea," I thought of it as an onion, with layers being peeled off one after the other to get to the core, but that's not right either. It's more like a plane making passes at a landing field, circling closer and closer each time. Or like a hawk, circling in on its prey.

And it has to be done that way because the direct route won't work. Circling, veering off at the last minute, taking off on talkative tangents, circling back, are the only way we can get to the secrets inside the story—and inside us. The only way we can bear to face what frightens us, to look at the terrible truth.

And Sturgeon's merciless. He's not going to spare us anything. He's going to make us look squarely at the things we want to avert our gaze from. And he's not even going to let us hang on to those things that gave us cause for hope along the way—that resourceful problem-solving kid, the trail of Friday-like footprints heading off along the beach, the comforting murmur of the sea in our ears. It's a brilliant, brutal, beautifully written story, at the same time heartbreaking and soaringly triumphant. The best thing he ever wrote.

I said before that nobody who hasn't read "The Man Who Lost the Sea" can really understand science fiction. I stand by that, but at the same time the story's not like any other science fiction story. It's unique.

So was its author. That's why it's an incredible privilege for me to be able to write about the wonderful story and this wonderful storyteller and possibly introduce one or both of them to new readers.

And to say the things I never got the chance to say to tell Theodore Sturgeon in life. Thank you, thank you, thank you for writing all your stories and letting me read them. And especially for writing "The Man Who Lost the Sea."

Your devoted reader,

Connie Willis

[“The Man Who Lost the Sea” is in Volume X of *The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon*.]

The [Widget], the [Wadget], and Boff

Part One

Throughout the continuum as we know it (and a good deal more, as we don't know it) there are cultures that fly and cultures that swim; there are boron folk and fluorine fellowships, cuprocoprophages and (roughly speaking) immaterial life-forms which swim and swirl around each other in space like so many pelagic shards of metaphysics. And some organize into superentities like a beehive or a slime-mold so that they live plurally to become singular, and some have even more singular ideas of plurality.

Now, no matter how an organized culture of intelligent beings is put together or where, regardless of what it's made of or how it lives, there is one thing all cultures have in common, and it is the most obvious of traits. There are as many names for it as there are cultures, of course, but in all it works the same way—the same way the inner ear functions (with its contributory synapses) in a human being when he steps on Junior's roller skate. He doesn't think about how far away the wall is, some wires or your wife, or in which direction: he *grabs*, and, more often than not, he *gets*—accurately and without analysis. Just so does an individual reflexively adjust when imbalanced in his socio-cultural matrix: he experiences the reflex of reflexes, a thing as large as the legendary view afforded a drowning man of his entire past, in a single illuminated instant wherein the mind moves, as it were, at right angles to time and travels high and far for its survey.

And this is true of every culture everywhere, the cosmos over. So obvious and necessary a thing is seldom examined: but it was once, by a culture which called this super-reflex "Synapse Beta sub Sixteen."

What came out of the calculator surprised them. They were, after all, expecting an answer.

Human eyes would never have recognized the device for what it was. Its memory bank was an atomic cloud, each particle of which was sealed away from the others by a self-sustaining

envelope of force. Subtle differences in nuclei, in probability shells, and in internal tensions were the coding, and fields of almost infinite variability were used to call up the particles in the desired combinations. These were channeled in a way beyond description in earthly mathematics, detected by a principle as yet unknown to us, and translated into language (or, more accurately, an analog of what we understand as language). Since this happened so far away, temporally, spatially, and culturally, proper nouns are hardly proper; it suffices to say that it yielded results, in this particular setting, which were surprising. These were correlated into a report, the gist of which was this:

Prognosis positive, or prognosis negative, depending upon presence or absence of Synapse Beta sub Sixteen.

The pertinent catalog listed the synapse in question as "indetectable except by field survey." Therefore an expedition was sent.

All of which may seem fairly remote until one realizes that the prognosis was being drawn for that youthful and dangerous aggregate of bubbling yeasts called "human culture," and that when the term "prognosis negative" was used it meant *finis*, the end, zero, *ne plus ultra* altogether.

It must be understood that the possessors of the calculator, the personnel of the expedition to Earth, were not Watchers in the Sky and Arbiters of Our Fate. Living in our midst, here and now, is a man who occupies himself with the weight-gain of amoebæ from their natal instant to the moment they fission. There is a man who, having produced neurosis in cats, turns them into alcoholics for study. Someone has at long last settled the matter of the camel's capacity for, and retention of, water. People like these are innocent of designs on the destinies of *all* amoebæ, cats, camels and cultures; there are simply certain things they want to *know*. This is the case no matter how unusual, elaborate, or ingenious their methods might be. So—an expedition came here for information.

EXCERPT FROM FIELD EXPEDITION [NOTEBOOK] [VOLUME] I:

CONCLUSION ... to restate the obvious, [we] have been on Earth long enough and more than long enough to have discovered anything and everything [we] [wished] about any [sensible-predictable-readable] culture anywhere. This one, however, is

quite beyond [understanding-accounting-for]. At first sight, [one] was tempted to conclude immediately that it possesses the Synapse, because no previously known culture has advanced to this degree without it, ergo.... And then [we] checked it with [our] [instruments] [! ! !] [Our] [gimmick] and our [kickshaw] gave [us] absolutely negative readings, so [we] activated a high-sensitivity [snivvy] and got results which approximate nonsense: the Synapse is scattered through the population randomly, here non-existent or dormant, there in brief full activity at [unheard-of] high levels. [I] thought [Smith] would go [out of (his) mind] and as for [myself], [I] had a crippling attack of the []s at the very concept. More for [our] own protection than for the furtherance of the Expedition, [we] submitted all our data to [our] [ship]'s [computer] and got what appeared to be even further nonsense: the conclusion that this species possesses the Synapse but to all intents and purposes does not use it.

How can a species possess Synapse Beta sub Sixteen and not use it? Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense!

So complex and contradictory are [our] data that [we] can only fall back on a microcosmic analysis and proceed by its guidance. [We] shall therefore isolate a group of specimens under [laboratory] control, even though it means using a [miserable] [primitive] [battery]-powered [wadget]. [We]'ll put our new-model [widget] on the job, too. [We]'ve had enough of this [uncanny, uncomfortable] feeling of standing in the presence of [apology-for-obscenity] paradox.¹

I

The town was old enough to have slums, large enough to have no specific "tracks" with a right and a wrong side. Its nature was such that a boarding house could, without being unusual, contain such varied rungs on the social ladder as a young, widowed night-club hostess and her three-year-old son; a very good vocational guidance expert; a young law clerk; the librarian from the high school; and a stage-struck maiden from a very small small town. They said Sam Bittelman, who nominally owned and operated the boarding house, could have been an engineer, and if he had been, a marine architect as well, but instead he had never risen higher than shop foreman. Whether this constituted failure

or success is speculative; apply to a chief petty officer or top sergeant who won't accept a commission, and to the president of your local bank, and take your pick of their arguments. It probably never occurred to Sam to examine the matter. He had other things to amuse him. Tolerant, curious, intensely alive, old Sam had apparently never retired from anything but his job at the shipyards back east.

He in turn was owned and operated by his wife, whom everyone called "Bitty" and who possessed the harshest countenance and the most acid idiom ever found in a charter member of the Suckers for Sick Kittens and Sob Stories Society. Between them they took care of their roomers in that special way possible only in boarding houses which feature a big dining table and a place set for everyone. Such places are less than a family, or more if you value your freedom. They are more than a hotel, or less if you like formality. To Mary Haunt, who claimed to be twenty-two and lied, the place was the most forgettable and soon-to-be-forgotten of stepping stones; to Robin it was home and more; it was the world and the universe, an environment as ubiquitous, unnoticed, and unquestioned as the water around a fish; but Robin would, of course, feel differently later. He was only three. The only other one of the Bittelmans' boarders who breathed what was uniquely the Bittelman quality as if it were air was Phil Halvorsen, a thoughtful young man in the vocational guidance field, whose mind was on food and housing only when they annoyed him, and since the Bittelmans made him quite comfortable, in effect they were invisible. Reta Schmidt appreciated the Bittelmans for a number of things, prime among which was the lengths to which her dollar went with them, for Miss Schmidt's employers were a Board of Education. Mr. Anthony O'Banion permitted himself a genuine admiration of almost nothing in these parts. So it remained for Sue Martin to be the only one in the place who respected and admired them, right from the start, with something approaching their due. Sue was Robin's widowed mother and worked in a night club as hostess and sometime entertainer. She had done, in the past, both better and worse. She still might do better for herself, but only that which would be worse for Robin. The Bittelmans were her godsend. Robin adored them, and the only thing they would not do for him was to spoil him. The Bittelmans were there to give

him breakfast in the mornings, to dress him when he went out to play, to watch over him and keep him amused and content until Sue rose at 11. The rest of the day was for Sue and Robin together, right up to his bedtime, when she tucked him in and storied him to sleep. And when she left for work at 9 P.M., the Bittelmans were there, safe and certain, ready and willing to cope with anything from a bladder to a blaze. They were like insurance and fire extinguishers, hardly ever used but comforting by their presence. So she valued them ... but then, Sue Martin was different from most people. So was Robin; however this is a truism when speaking of three-year-olds.

Such was the population of Bittelman's boarding house, and if they seem too many and too varied to sort out all at once, have patience and remember that each of them felt the same way on meeting all the others.

II

A pawnshop is a dismal place.

A pawnshop in the rain. A closed pawnshop in the rain, on a Sunday.

Philip Halvorsen did not object. He had a liking for harmony, and the atmosphere suited him well just now, his thoughts, his feelings. A sunbeam would have been an intrusion. A flower shop could not have contributed so much. People, just now, would have been intolerable.

He leaned his forehead against the wet black steel of the burglar-proof gate and idly inventoried the contents of the window and his thoughts about them. Like the window and its contents, and the dark recesses inside, his thoughts were miscellaneous, cluttered, captured in that purgatory of uselessness wherein things are not dead, only finished with what they have been and uncaring of what will happen to them and when. His thoughts were binoculars without eyes, cameras without film, silent guitars and unwound watches.

He found himself approving more of the guitars than the two dirty violins hanging in the window. He almost wondered why this should be, almost let the question disappear into lethargy, and at last sighed and ran the matter down because he knew it would bother him otherwise and he was in no mood to be

bothered. He looked at the instruments lazily, one, the other, analyzing and comparing. They had a great deal in common, and some significant differences. Having a somewhat sticky mind, to which windblown oddments of fact had been adhering for nearly thirty years now, he knew of the trial-and-error evolution of those resonance-chambers and of the high degree of perfection they had come to. Given that design followed function in both the violin and the guitar, and aside from any preference in the sounds they made (actually Halvorsen was completely indifferent to music anyway), then why should he intuitively prefer the guitars he saw over the violins? Size, proportion, number of strings, design of bridge, frets or lack of them, finish, peg and tailpiece mechanics—all these had their differences and all were perfect for the work they did.

Suddenly, then, he saw it, and his mind swiftly thumbed through the mental pictures of all the violins he had ever seen. They all checked out. One flickering glance at the guitars in the window settled the matter.

All violins have a scroll carved at the end of the neck—*all* of them. There is scrollwork on some guitars, none on others; it's obviously optional. The back-bending spiral at the end of a violin's neck is not optional, but traditional, and it has no function. Halvorsen nodded slightly and permitted his mind to wander away from the matter. It wasn't important—not in itself; only settling it was important. His original, intuitive approval of guitars over violins was not a matter of moment either; his preference for the functional over the purely traditional was just that—a preference.

None of this required much of Halvorsen's conscious effort or attention. The survey, the sequence, was virtually reflexive, and his thoughts moved as fish in some deep clear pool might move, hanging and hanging, fanning, then suddenly darting about with a swirl and a splash, to hang again fanning, alive and waiting.

He stood motionless, the fine rain soaking into the back of his collar and his eyes unseeing but receptive. Binoculars with mother-of-pearl; binoculars without. A watch with glass rubies in the face. Display cards: cheap combs, cheap wallets, cheap pens. An electric steam iron with a frayed cord. A rack of second-hand clothing.

Guns.

He felt again that vague dissatisfaction, set up a certain amount of lethargic resistance to it, and when it came through anyway he patiently gave it its head. He looked at the guns. What bothered him about the guns?

One had a pearl handle and rococo etching along the barrel, but that wasn't it. He glanced down the row and settled on a .38 automatic, about as functional an artifact as could be imagined—small, square, here knurled and there polished, with the palm safety and lock-safety just where they should be. And still he felt that faint disapproval, that dissatisfaction that spelled criticism. He widened his scan to all the guns, and felt it just as much. Just as little.

It was categorical then. It had to do with all these guns, or with all guns. He looked again, and again, and within this scope found no crevice for the prying of his reason, so he turned the problem on its back and looked again: what would a gun be like if it satisfied this fastidious intuition of his?

It came in a flash, and he hardly believed it: a flimsy structure of rolled sheet metal with a simple firing pin on a piece hinged and sprung like the business part of a rat-trap. There was no butt, there were no sights. No trigger either; just a simple catch and—what was that? —and a piece of string. He visualized it sitting on a polished surface on a wire stand, its thin barrel angled upwards about 45°, like a toy cannon. Its caliber was about .38. The feature which struck him most was the feeling of fragility, lightness, in the whole design. Design! What would an object like that be designed for?

He looked again at the pawned guns. Among the things they had in common was massiveness. Breeches were cast steel, muzzles thick-walled, probably all rifled; parts were tempered, hardened, milled, designed, and built to contain and direct repeated explosions, repeated internal assaults by hot hurtling metal.

It was as if a little red signal-light flickered on the concept *repeated*. Was that it, that all these guns were designed for repeated use? Was he dissatisfied with that? Why?

He conjured up the image of a single-shot dueling pistol he had once handled: long-barreled, muzzle-loading, with a powder-pan for priming and a chip of flint fixed to the hammer. To his surprise he found the little metal red light still aflicker; this was a

design that displeased him too, somewhere in the area labeled *repeated*.

Even a single-shot pistol was designed to be used over again; that must be it. Then to him, a gun satisfied its true function only if it was designed to be used only once. *Enough* is the criterion of optimum design, and in this case once was enough.

Halvorsen snorted angrily. He disliked being led by rational means to a patently irrational conclusion. He cast back over his reasoning, looking for the particular crossroads where he must have taken a wrong turning.

There was none.

At this point his leisurely, almost self-powered curiosity was replaced by an incandescent ferocity of examination. Logic burned in Halvorsen as fury did in other men, and he had no tolerance for the irrational. He attacked it as a personal indignity, and would not let up until he had wrapped it up, tied it down, in the fabric of his understanding.

He let himself visualize the “gun” of his satisfied imagination, with its mousetrap firing mechanism, its piece of string, its almost useless flimsiness, and for a moment pictured police, cattlemen, Army officers handling such a ridiculous object. But the vision dissolved and he shook his head; the guns ordinarily used by such people satisfied his sense of function perfectly. He slipped (hypothetically) into the consciousness of such a man and regarded his gun—a gun—any gun with satisfaction. No, this seemed a personal matter, unlike the dissatisfaction everyone should feel (if they cared) about the extraordinary fact that automobiles are streamlined only where they show, and are powered by a heat-engine which is inoperable without a cooling system.

What's so special about my mousetrap gun? he demanded of himself, and turned his eye inward to look at it again. There it sat, on a polished surface—table-top, was it? —with its silly piece of string leading forward toward him and its muzzle tilted upward, unabashedly showing off its sleazy construction.

Why could he see how thin the metal of that muzzle was? Because it was aimed right at the bridge of his nose.

Make a statement, Halvorsen, and test it. Statement: Other guns satisfy other men because they can be used over and over again. This gun satisfies me because it goes off once, and once is

enough.

Test: A dueling pistol goes off only once; yet it can be reloaded and used again. Why not this? Answer: Because whoever uses a dueling pistol expects to be able to use it again. Whoever sees it used expects it will be used again, because the world goes on.

After Halvorsen's mousetrap gun went off, the world wouldn't go on. Not for Halvorsen—which of course is the same thing. "I am the core and the center of the universe" is a fair statement for anyone.

So restate, and conclude: The optimum gun design is that which, having shot Halvorsen between the eyes, need no longer exist. Since *optimum* carried with it the flavor of *preferred performance*, it is fair to state that within himself Halvorsen found a preference for being shot to death. More specifically, for dying. Correction: for being dead—gladly.

Momentarily, Halvorsen felt such pleasure at having solved his problem that he neglected to look at the solution, and when he did, it chilled him far more than the fine rain could.

Why should he want to be dead?

He glanced at the racked guns in the pawnshop and saw them as if for the first time, each one very real and genuinely menacing. He shuddered, clung for a moment to the wet black steel of the gate, then abruptly turned away.

In all his thoughtful—thought-filled—life he had never consciously entertained such a concept. Perhaps this was because he was a receptive person rather than a transmissive one. What he collected he used on his external world—his job—rather than on himself. He had no need for the explanations and apologies, the interpretations and demands-to-be-heard of the outgoing person, so he had no need to indulge in self-seeking and the complicated semantics of ego-translation. He was rather a clearing-house for the facts he found, taking knowledge and experience from *here* and storing them virtually untouched until they could be applied *there*.

He walked slowly homeward, in a state that would be numbness except for the whirling, wondering core which turned and poked and worried at this revelation. Why should he want to be dead?

Philip Halvorsen loved being alive. Correction: He enjoyed being alive. (Question: Why the correction? File for later.) He was

a vocational guidance worker employed by a national social service organization. He was paid what he should be, according to his sense of values, and thanks to the Bittelmans he lived a little better on it than he might otherwise. He did not work for money, anyway; his work was a way of thinking, a way of life. He found it intriguing, engrossing, deeply satisfying. Each applicant was a challenge, each placement a victory over one or more of the enemies that plague mankind—insecurity, inferiority, blindness, and ignorance. Each time he looked up from his desk and saw a new applicant entering his cubicle, he experienced a strange silent excitement. It was a pressure, a power, like flicking on the master switch of a computing machine; he sat there with all relays open and all circuits blank, waiting for the answers to those first two questions: "What are you doing now?" and "What do you want to do?" Just that; it was enough for that indefinable sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction to make itself known to him. And just as he had analyzed its source in the matter of guns, so he analyzed his clients. That flickering light signaling wrongness, misapplication, malfunction, misevaluation—all the flaws in design, the false goals, the frustrations and hurts of those who wonder if they have chosen the right vocation—that light burned on while he worked on each case, and would not go out until he found the answer. Once or twice he had wished, whimsically, that his imagined signal light would illuminate a sign for the client which said STEEPLEJACK and for that one which said FROG FARMER, but it refused to be so obliging. It only told him when he was wrong. Being right involved laborious and meticulous work, but he did it gladly. And when at last he was satisfied, he frequently found that his work had just begun: to tell an eighty-dollar-a-week bank clerk that his proper niche is in freight-handling with a two-year apprenticeship at fifty is initially a thankless task. But Halvorsen knew how to be quiet and wait, and had become a past master at the art of letting a client fight himself, defeat himself, reconstruct himself, and at last persuade himself that the vocational counselor was right. And all of it, Halvorsen liked, from the challenge to the accomplishment. Why, why should there be a wish in him to have this cease, to end the world in which all these intriguing problems existed? And to be glad of its ending?

What would he advise a client, a stranger, if that stranger

blurted out such a desire?

Well, he wouldn't. It would depend. He would simply throw that in with everything else about the client—age, education, temperament, marital status, I.Q., and all the rest of it, and let the death-wish throw its weight along with all the other factors. It would, however, predispose him to conclude that the man was intolerably misplaced in some area: in a marriage, a family situation, a social beartrap of some kind ... or his job. His job. Was he, Halvorsen, judge and arbiter of occupations—was he in the wrong job?

He slouched along in the rain, huddled down into himself to escape a far more penetrating chill than this drenching mist. So uncharacteristically wrapped in his inward thought was he that he had taken three steps on dry pavement before he became aware of it. He stopped and took his bearings.

He stood under the marquee of the smallest and cheapest of the town's four theaters. It was closed and dark, this being Sunday in a "blue-law" district, but dead bulbs and locked doors did not modify the shrillness of its decorations. Over the main entrance were two groups of huge letters, one for each of the two features on the bill. *SIN FOR SALE*, one shrieked, and the other blared back *SLAVES OF THE HELL-FLOWER*. Under these was a third sign, offering as a special added attraction *Love Rites of a South Sea Eden*. From the sidewalk on the far left, up to the marquee, across and down the other side was an arch of cardboard cut-outs of women, wilting and wet, unnaturally proportioned and inhumanly posed, with scraps of ribbon and drape, locks of hair and induced shadows performing a sort of indicative concealment on their unbelievable bodies. Over the box-office was the stern advice: *ADULTS ONLY! ! !* and papering the supporting pillars just inside the mirrored cavern of a lobby were still photographs of highlights of the pictures: A bare-backed female with her hands trussed to a high tree-branch, being whipped; a man standing, gun in hand, over a delectable corpse whose head hung back and down over the edge of the bed so that her carefully arranged hair swept the floor, and some flyblown samples of the *South Sea Eden* with the portraits of its inhabitants smeared strategically with rubberstamp ink in angry and careless obedience to some local by-law.

At the best of times this sort of display left Phil Halvorsen cold. At the worst of times (up to now) he would have felt a mild

disgust leavened by enough amusement at the outhouse crudity of it to make it supportable—and forgettable. But at the moment things were a little worse than the worst had ever been before. It was as if his earlier unpleasant revelation had in some obscure way softened him up, opened a seam in a totally unexpected place in his armor. The display smote him like a blast of heat. He blinked and stepped back a pace, half-raising his hands and screwing his eyes shut. Behind the lids, the picture of his ridiculous one-shot cannon rose up roaring. He thought he could see a bullet emerging from its smoking muzzle like the tip of a hot black tongue. He shuddered away from the millisecond nightmare and opened his eyes, only to get a second and even more overwhelming reaction from the theater-front.

My God, what's happening to me? he silently screamed to himself. He pounded his forehead with his fists twice, then put his head down and ran up the street, up the hill. His photographic eye had picked up the banner inside the lobby, and as he ran, part of him coldly read it:

SEE (in flaming scarlet) the big-city orgies.

SEE the temptation of a teen-ager.

SEE lust run riot.

SEE the uncensored rites of an island cult.

SEE ... SEE ...

There was more. As he ran, he moaned. And then he thought, at the Bittelmans there are people, it is light, it is warm, it is almost home.

He began to run to something instead of away.

III

The Bittelmans' kitchen was a vague "backstairs" area to O'Banion and a functional adjunct of the boarding house to Halvorsen; to Miss Schmidt it was forbidden ground which excited no special interest for that—almost all the world was forbidden ground to Miss Schmidt. In it Sue Martin was as content as she was anywhere, and among the torments of Mary Haunt, the kitchen was a special hell. But in Robin's world it was central, more so than the bedroom he shared with his mother, more so than his crib. He ate in the kitchen, played there when it was raining or especially cold. When he went outdoors it was

through the kitchen door, and it was a place to come back to with a bruised knee, with a hollow stomach, with a sudden flood of loneliness or of a three-year-old's wild manic passion. It was big and warm and full of friends.

The most resourceful of these friends was, of course, Bitty, who without ever losing her gruffness knew the right time to apply a cookie or a story (usually about a little boy with a beautiful mother) or a swat on the bottom. Sam was a friend, too, mostly as something safe to climb on. Of late, O'Banion had carved a rather special niche for himself, and Robin had always liked a limited amount of Miss Schmidt's self-conscious passiveness; she was a wonderful listener. He treated Halvorsen with cheerful respect, and Mary Haunt as if she did not exist. There were other people, too, every bit as much so as anyone who ate and had a job and occupied rooms elsewhere in the house. There was the electric mixer and the washing machine—in Robin's economical language "Washeen"—the blender and the coffeepot; in short, everything which had a motor in it. (The presence or absence of motors in percolators is arguable only by those with preconceptions.) To him they were all alive, responsive and articulate, and he held converse with them all. He showed them his toys and he told them the news, he bade them goodbye and good morning, hello, what's the matter, and happy birthday.

And besides all these people, there were Boff and Googie, who, though by no means limited to the kitchen, were often there.

They were not there on that dark Sunday while the sky grieved and Halvorsen fought his personal devils outdoors. "Mitster, Boff an' Googie gone for ride," Robin informed the electric mixer. Its name, Mitster, was identical in his vocabulary with "Mister" and was a clear link between the machine and the males he heard spoken of, and just another proof of the living personality he assigned to it. He got a kitchen chair and carried it effortfully over to the work-table, where he put it down and climbed on it. He tilted the mixer up and back and turned its control-cowling, and it began to hum softly. Bitty kept the beaters in a high drawer well out of his reach and let him play with the therefore harmless machine to his heart's content. "Ats right, Mitster," he crooned. "Eat your yunch. Hey, Washeen!" he called to the washing machine, "Mitster's eatin' his yunch all up, I go' give him a cookie, he's a good boy." He revved the control up and down,

the machine whining obediently. He spun the turntable, turned the motor off, listened to the ball-bearings clicking away in the turntable, stopped it and turned on the motor again. He turned suddenly at the nudge of some sixth sense and saw O'Banion in the doorway. "Goo' morning Tonio," he called, beaming. "Go picnic now?"

"Not today, it's raining," said O'Banion, "and it's 'good afternoon' now." He crossed to the table. "What you up to, fellow?"

"Mitster eatin' his yunch."

"Your mother asleep?"

"Yis."

O'Banion stood watching the child's complete preoccupation with the machine. Little son of a gun, he thought, how did you do it?

The question was all he could express about the strangely rewarding friendship which flowered between him and Robin. He had never liked (nor, for that matter, disliked) a child in his life. He had never been exposed to one before; his only sibling was an older sister and he had never associated with anyone but contemporaries since he was a child himself.

Robin had caught him alone one day and had demanded to know his name. "Tony O'Banion," he had growled reluctantly. "Tonio?" "Tony O'Banion," he had corrected distinctly. "Tonio," Robin had said positively, and from then on that was inalterably that. And surprisingly, O'Banion had come to like it. And when, on the outskirts of town, someone had set up something called a Kiddie Karnival, a sort of miniature amusement park, and he had been assigned to handle land rentals there for his firm, he found himself thinking of Robin every time he saw the place, and of the Karnival every time he saw Robin, until one warm Sunday he startled himself and everyone else concerned by asking Sue Martin if he could take the boy there. She had looked at him gravely for a moment and said, "Why?"

"I think he might like it."

"Well, thanks," she had said warmly, "I think that's wonderful." And so he and Robin had gone.

And they'd gone again, several times, mostly on Sundays when Sue Martin was taking her one luxurious afternoon nap of the week, but a couple of times during the week too, when O'Banion

had business out there and could conveniently pick the child up on the way out from the office and drop him again on the way back. And then, just for a change, a picnic, Robin's very first, by the bank of a brook where they had watched jewel-eyed baby frogs and darting minnows and a terrifying miniature monster that he later identified as a dragonfly nymph; and Robin had asked so many questions that he had gone to a bookstore the next day and bought a bird book and a wild-flower guide.

Occasionally he asked himself *why*? What was he getting out of it? and found the answers either uncomfortable or elusive. Perhaps it was the relaxation: for the first time he could have communion with another human being without the cautious and watchful attention he usually paid to "Where did you go to school?" and "Who are your people?" Perhaps it was the warmth of friendship radiating from a face so disturbingly like the one which still intruded itself between his eyes and his work once in a while, and which was so masked and controlled when he encountered it in the flesh.

And there had been the Sunday when Sue Martin, after having given her permission for one of these outings, had suddenly said, "I haven't much to do this afternoon. Are these excursions of yours strictly stag?" "Yes," he had said immediately, "they are." He'd told *her*. But—it didn't feel like a victory, and she had not seemed defeated when she shrugged and smiled and said, "Let me know when you go coeducational." After that she didn't put a stop to the picnics, either, which would have pleased him by permitting him to resent her. He found himself wishing she would ask again, but he knew she would not, not ever. And if he should ask her to come, and she should refuse ... he could not bear the thought. Sometimes he thought the whole business of amusing the child was done to impress the mother; he had overheard Mary Haunt make a remark to Miss Schmidt once that intimated as much, and had furiously sworn off for all of six hours, which was when Robin asked him where they would go next. As long as it was simple, a matter between him and the child, it required no excuses or explanations. As soon as he placed the matter in any matrix, he became confused and uncertain. He therefore avoided analyses, and asked himself admiringly and academically, little son of a gun, how did you do it? while he watched Robin's animated conversation with the electric mixer.

He rumpled Robin's hair and went to the stove, where he picked up the coffeepot and swirled it. It was almost full, and he lit the gas under it.

"Wha' you do, Tonio? Make coffee?"

"Yea bo."

"Okay," said Robin, as if granting permission. "Boff doesn't drink coffee, Tonio," he confided. "Oh no."

"He doesn't, hm?" O'Banion looked around and up. "Is Boff here?"

"No," said Robin. "He not here."

"Where'd he go? Out with the Bittelmans?"

"Yis." The coffeepot grumbled and Robin said, "*Hello, Coffeepot.*"

Halvorsen came in and stood blindly in the doorway. O'Banion looked up and greeted him, then said under his breath, "My God!" and crossed the room. "You all right, Halvorsen?"

Halvorsen directed blind eyes at the sound of his voice, and O'Banion could watch seeing enter them slowly, like the fade-in on a movie screen. "What?" His face was wet with the rain, fish-belly pale, and he stood slumping like a man with a weight on his back, raising his face to look up rather than lifting his head.

"You'd better sit down," said O'Banion. He told himself that this unwonted concern for the tribulations of a fellow-human was purely a selfish matter of not wanting to shovel the stunned creature up off the floor. Yet as Halvorsen turned toward the ell with its wooden chairs, O'Banion caught at the open front of Halvorsen's coat. "Let me take this, it's sopping."

"No," said Halvorsen. "No." But he let O'Banion take the coat; rather, he walked out of it, leaving O'Banion with it foolishly in his hands. O'Banion cast about him, then hung it up on the broom-hook and turned again to Halvorsen, who had just fallen heavily back into a chair.

Again Halvorsen went through that slow transition from blindness to sight, from isolation to awareness. He made some difficult, internal effort and then said, "Supper ready?"

"We roll our own," said O'Banion. "Bitty and Sam are taking their once-a-month trip to the fleshpots."

"Fleshpots," said Robin, without turning his head.

Carefully controlling his face and his voice, O'Banion continued, "They said to raid the refrigerator, only hands off the

leg o' lamb, that's for tomorrow." Motioning toward Robin with his head, he added, "He doesn't miss a trick," and at last released a broad grin.

Halvorsen said, "I'm not hungry."

"I've got some coffee going."

"Good."

O'Banion dropped a round asbestos mat on the table and went for the coffeepot. On the way back he got a cup and saucer. He put them on the table and sat down. Sugar was already there; spoons were in a tumbler, handles down, country-style. He poured and added sugar and stirred. He looked across at Halvorsen, and saw something on that reserved face that he had read about but had never seen before; the man's lips were blue. Only then did it occur to him to get a cup for Halvorsen. He went for it, and remembered milk, too, just in case. He brought them back, hesitated, and then poured the second cup. He put a spoon in the saucer, and with sudden shyness pushed it and the milk toward the other man. "Hey!"

"What?" Halvorsen said in the same dead, flat tone, and "Oh. Oh! Thanks, O'Banion, thanks very I'm sorry." Suddenly he laughed forcefully and without mirth. He covered his eyes and said plaintively, "What's the *matter* with me?"

It was a question neither could answer, and they sat sipping coffee uncomfortably, a man who didn't know how to unburden himself and a man who had never taken up another's burden. Into this tableau walked Mary Haunt. She had on a startling yellow hostess gown and had a magazine tucked under her arm. She threw one swift gaze around the room and curled her lip.

"Grand Central Station," she growled and walked out.

O'Banion's anger came as a great relief to him at just that moment; he was almost grateful to the girl. "One of these days someone's going to grab that kid by the scruff of the neck and housebreak her," he snorted.

Halvorsen found a voice, too, and probably was as grateful for the change in focus. "It won't last," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she can't go on that way much longer," said Halvorsen thoughtfully. He paused and closed his eyes; O'Banion could see him pulling himself hand over hand out of his personal swamp, moving to dry ground, high ground, where he could look with

familiarity at a real world again. When he opened his eyes he gave O'Banion a strange little smile and said, as if in parenthesis, "Thanks for the coffee, O'Banion," and went on: "She's waiting for the Big Break. She thinks she deserves it and that it will come to her if she only waits. She really believes that. You've heard of high-school kids who perch on drugstore stools hoping for a movie scout to come along and discover them. That's harmless as long as they do it an hour or two a day. But Mary Haunt does it every minute she's out of this house. None of us here could help her, so she treats us the way anyone treats useless things. But you ought to see her down at the station."

"What station?"

"She types continuities at the radio station," said Halvorsen. "From what I hear, she's not very good, but on the other hand they don't pay her much money, so nobody kicks. But to her a radio station is the edge of the world she wants to crash—it starts there and goes to TV and to the movies. I'll bet you anything you like she has a scene all rehearsed in her mind, where a big producer or director stops here and drops in at the radio station to see someone, and *bang!* our Mary's a starlet being groomed for the top."

"She'd better learn some manners," grumbled O'Banion.

"Oh, she's got manners when she thinks they'll do her some good."

"Why doesn't she use them on you, for example?"

"Me?"

"Yes. Don't you get people better jobs, that sort of thing?"

"I see a lot of people, a lot of different kinds of people," said Halvorsen, "but they have one thing in common: they aren't sure what they want to do, to be." He pointed his spoon at the doorway. "She is. She may be wrong, but she's certain."

"Well, what about Sue Martin?" said O'Banion. He pursued the subject quickly, almost thoughtlessly, because of a vague feeling that if he didn't, Halvorsen would slip back into that uncomfortable introspective silence. "Surely there's a lot about show business Mary Haunt could learn from her."

Halvorsen gave the nearest thing yet to a grin and reached for the coffeepot. "Mrs. Martin's a nightclub entertainer," he said "and as far as Mary Haunt's concerned, night clubs are slums."

O'Banion blushed violently and cursed himself for it. "Why that

little—no background, no—no—how could *she* look down on ... I mean, she's a little *nobody!*" Conscious that he was spluttering under the direct and passionless gaze of Halvorsen's dark eyes, he reached for the first thing he could think of that was not an absolute non sequitur: "One night a couple of months ago Mrs. Martin and I saw her throw a fit of hysterics over something ... oh, Miss Schmidt had a magazine she wanted ... anyway, after it was all over, Mrs. Martin said something about Mary Haunt that could have been a compliment. I mean, to some people. I can't think of Mary Haunt ever doing as much for her."

"What did she say?"

"Mrs. Martin? Oh, she said anybody who gets between Mary Haunt and what she wants is going to have a Mary-sized hole through them."

"It wasn't a compliment," said Halvorsen immediately. "Mrs. Martin knows as well as you or I do what's between that girl and her Big Break."

"What is?"

"Mary Haunt."

O'Banion thought about that for a moment and then chuckled. "A Mary-sized hole wouldn't leave much." He looked up. "You're quite a psychologist."

"Me?" said Halvorsen in genuine surprise. At that moment Robin, who had all this while been murmuring confidences to the mixer, switched off the machine and looked up. "Boff!" he cried joyously. "Hello, Boff!" He watched something move toward him, turning slightly to follow it with his eyes until it settled on the spice shelf over his table. "Wash you doin', Boff? Come for dinner?" Then he laughed, as if he had thought of something pleasant and very funny.

"I thought Boff was out with the Bittelmans, Robin," O'Banion called.

"No, he hide," said Robin, and laughed uproariously. "Boff right here. He come back."

Halvorsen watched this with a dazed smile. "Who on earth is Boff?" he asked O'Banion.

"Imaginary playmate," said O'Banion knowledgeably. "I'm used to it now but I don't mind telling you it gave me the creeps at first. Lots of kids have them. My sister did, or so Mother says—

Sister doesn't remember it now. A little girl called Ginny who used to live in the butler's pantry. You laugh off this 'Boff' and the other one—her name's Googie—until you see Robin holding the door open to let them in, or refusing to go out to play until they get downstairs. And he isn't kidding. That's a nice little kid most of the time, Halvorsen, but some things will make him blow up like a little bottle of nitro, and one of 'em is to deny that Boff and Googie are real. I know. I tried to once and it took half a day and six rides on a merry-go-round to calm him down." He emphasized with a forefinger: "Six rides for Boff and Googie too."

Halvorsen watched the child: "I'll be darned." He shook his head slightly. "Is that—unhealthy?"

"I bought a book," said O'Banion, and, unaccountably, found himself blushing again, "and it says no, long as the child has good contact with reality, and believe me, he has. They grow out of it. Nothing to worry about."

Just then Robin cocked his head up to the spice shelf, as if he had heard a sound. Then he said, "Okay, Boff," climbed down from his chair, carried the chair across the kitchen to its place against the wall, and said cheerfully, "Tonio, Boff wan see cars. Okay. Shall we?"

O'Banion rose, laughing. "My master's voice. I got the *Popular Electronics* special issue on this year's automobiles and Boff and Robin can't get enough of it."

"Oh?" Halvorsen smiled. "What do they like this year?"

"Red ones. Come on, Robin. See you, Halvorsen."

"See you."

Robin trotted after O'Banion, paused near the door. "Come on, Boff!"

He waved violently at Halvorsen. "See you, Have-sum-gum."

Halvorsen waved back, and they were gone.

Halvorsen sat numbly for a while, his hand still raised. The presence of the other man and the child had been a diversion from his strange inner explosion and its shock-waves. Now they were gone, but he would not permit himself to sink into that welter of approaching bullet, rain-damped torsos, *why do I want to be dead?* So he hung motionless for a moment between disturbance and diversion. He thought of following O'Banion into the parlor. He thought of sinking back into his panic, facing it, fighting it. But he wasn't ready to fight, not yet, and he didn't

want to run ... and he couldn't stay like this. It was like not breathing. Anyone can stop breathing, but not for long.

"Mr. Halvorsen?"

Soft-footed, soft-voiced, timidly peering about her to be sure she was not intruding, Miss Schmidt came in. Halvorsen could have hugged her. "Come in, come in!" he cried warmly.

The half-alive smile brightened like fanned embers at his tone. "Good afternoon, Mr. Halvorsen. I was looking, that is, wondering, you know, if Mr. Bittelman was back yet, and I thought perhaps that ..." She wet her lips and apparently thought it was worth another try. "I wanted to see him about—I mean to say, ask him if he—about something." She exhaled, took a breath, and would surely have come out with more of the same, but Halvorsen broke in.

"No, not yet. Sure picked a miserable day for a joy-ride."

"It doesn't seem to matter to the Bittelmanns. Every fourth week, like clockwork." She suddenly uttered a soft little bleat of a laugh. "I'm sure I don't mean clockwork, Mr. Halvorsen, I mean, four weeks."

He laughed politely, for her sake. "I know what you mean." He saw her drop her eyes to her kneading hands, divined that her next movement would be toward the door. He felt he couldn't bear that, not just now. "How about—uh—a cup of tea or something. Sandwich. I was just going to—" He rose.

She went pink and smiled again. "Why, I—"

There was a short, sibilant sound in the doorway, a sniff, a small snort of anger. Mary Haunt stood there glowering. Miss Schmidt said, faintly, "No, no thank you, I'd better, I mean, just go and ... I only wanted to see if Mr. Bittelman was—" She faded out altogether and tiptoed apologetically to the door. Mary Haunt swung her shoulders but did not move her feet. Miss Schmidt slid out and escaped past her.

Halvorsen found himself standing, half angry, half foolish. His own last words echoed in his mind: "Sandwich. I was just going to—" and he let them push him to the other end of the kitchen. He was furious, but why? Nothing had happened; a lot had happened. He would have liked to rear back on his hind legs and blast her for persecuting a little defenseless rabbit like Miss Schmidt; yet what had she actually done? Couldn't she say with absolute truth, "Why, I never said a word to her!"? He felt

ineffectual, unmanned; and the picture of the flimsy gun flickered inside his eyelids and shocked him. He trembled, pulled himself together, painfully aware of the bright angry eyes watching his back from the doorway. He fumbled into the breadbox and took out half a loaf of Bitty's magnificent home-baked bread. He took down the breadboard and got a knife from the drawer, and began to saw. Behind him he heard a sharp slap as Mary Haunt tossed her magazine on the table beside the coffeepot, and then he was conscious of her at his elbow. If she had said one word, she would have faced a blaze of anger out of all proportion to anything that had happened. But she didn't, and didn't: she simply stood there and watched him. He finished cutting the first slice, started on the second. He almost swung to face her but checked the motion, whereupon the knife bit into the first joint of his thumb. He closed his eyes, finished cutting the bread, and turned away to the refrigerator. He opened it and then bent over the shelves, holding his cut thumb in his other hand.

"What do you think you're doing?" asked the girl.

"What's it look like?" he growled. His cut suddenly began to hurt.

"I couldn't say," said Mary Haunt. She stepped to the breadboard, picked up the knife and with it whisked the bread he had cut into the sink.

"Hey!"

"You better push that cut up against the freezer coils for a second," she said with composure. She put a hand on the loaf and with one sweep straightened its hacked end. "Sit down," she said as he filled his lungs to roar at her. "If there's anything I hate it's to see someone clumsy paddling around in food." One, two, three, four even slices fell to the board as she spoke. And again she interrupted him just as he was forming a wounded-bear bellow, "You want a sandwich or not? Just sit down over there and stay out from underfoot."

Slackjawed, he watched her. Was she doing him a kindness? Mary Haunt doing someone a *kindness*?

He found himself obeying her, pressing his cut against the freezer coils. It felt good. He withdrew his hand just as she came toward the refrigerator, and dodged out of her way. He backed to the table, sat down, and watched her.

She was something to watch. The pale, over-manicured hands

flew. She set out mayonnaise, cream cheese, a platter of cold-cuts, parsley, radishes. With almost a single motion she put a small frying pan and a butter-melter on the stove and lit the fire under them. Into the frying pan went a couple of strips of bacon; into the other, two tablespoons of water and half the fluid from a jar of capers. She added spices, "by ear"—a shake, a pinch: poultry seasoning, oregano, garlic salt. The tiny pan began to hiss, and suddenly the kitchen smelt like the delivery entrance to paradise. She snatched it off, scraped the contents into a bowl, added cream cheese and mayonnaise, and thrust it under the electric mixer. She turned the bacon, shoved two of the bread slices into the toaster, and busied herself with a paring knife and the radishes.

Halvorsen shook his head unbelievably and muttered an exclamation. The girl threw him a look of such intense scorn that he dropped his eyes. He found them resting on her magazine. It was called *Family Day* and was a home-making publication from a chain supermarket—in no way a movie magazine.

Out of the frying pan came the bacon, crackling. She drained it on a paper towel and crumbled it into the bowl where the mixer was working. As if some kitchen choreographer was directing the work, the toast popped up as she reached her hand for it. She dropped in the other two slices and went back to her alchemy with the radishes. In a moment she turned off the mixer and spread the contents of the bowl on the toast. On this she laid cold-cuts, narrow strips of various kinds, deftly weaving them so they formed a beautiful basket pattern. As she finished the first two, the second pair popped out of the toaster; it was a continuous thing, the way she did all the different things she did; it was like music or a landscape flowing by a train window.

She did something swift with the knife, and set the results out on two plates: bite-sized sandwiches arranged like a star, and in the center what looked like a tiny bouquet of rosebuds—the radishes, prepared with curled petals and nested in a neat bed of parsley, its stems all drawn together by one clever half-hitch in one of them. The whole amazing performance had taken perhaps six minutes. "You can make your own coffee," she snapped.

He came over and picked up one of the plates. "Why, this is—is—well, *thanks!*" He looked at her and smiled. "Come on, let's sit down."

"With you?" She stalked to the table, carrying the other plate, and scooped up the magazine as if it were a guilty secret. She went to the door. "You can clean up," she said, "and if you ever tell anyone about this I'll snatch you baldheaded."

Staring after her, stunned, he absently picked up one of the sandwiches and bit into it, and for a moment forgot even his amazement, it was so delicious. He sat down slowly, and for the first time since he had started comparing violins with guitars in the pawn-shop, he gave himself up completely to his senses and forgot his troubles. He ate the sandwiches slowly and appreciatively and let them own him.

EXCERPT FROM FIELD EXPEDITION [NOTEBOOK]:

So [weary-irritated] [I] can barely [write]. As if this kind of research wasn't arduous enough at the best of times, which this is not, with the best of equipment, which [we] lack, [I] am plagued by a [partner-teammate] with insuperable enthusiasm and a quality [I] can only describe as headlong stubbornness. [Smith] means well, of course, but the universe is full of well-meaning [individuals] [who] have succeeded only in making []s of themselves.

All during the tedious and infuriating process of re[charging] the [wadget] [Smith] argued that purely objective observation would get [us] nowhere and would take [forever]; that [we] have sufficient data now to apply stimuli to these specimens and determine once and for all if a reliable, functional condition of Synapse Beta sub Sixteen is possible to them. [I] of course objected that it is against [our] highest [ethic] to apply [force] to alien species; [Smith] then argued that it would not really be [force], but only the [magnification-amplification-increased efficiency] of that which they already possessed. [I] then pointed out that even if [we] succeed, [we] can only test the final result by means which may readily kill some or all of the specimens. This [Smith] is willing to worry about only when the time comes. [I] pointed out further that in order to supply the necessary stimuli [we] shall have to re[wire] not only the [widget], but that []ed, inefficient, [stone] age excuse for a [mechanism], the [wadget]. [Smith] readily agreed, and while [I] went on arguing [he] began re[wiring], and [I] argued, and [he] [wired], and by the time [I]'d [made my point] [he] was practically finished and

[I] found [myself] holding the [light] as well.

[I] forgot to ask [Smith] what [he] planned to do if one of the specimens finds out what [we]'re up to. Kill it? Kill them all? It wouldn't [surprise] [me]. In the name of [research] [Smith] would happily [watch] [his] [elderly forebear]'s [knuckles] being [knurled].

IV

Miss Schmidt, muffled up to the pharynx in a quilted robe, bed-socked, slippered and shawled, half-dozed in her easy chair. When she heard the sounds she had waited for, she jumped up, went to her door, which was ajar, and stood a moment to listen and be sure. Then she tightened her sash, checked the hooks-and-eyes under her chin, tugged her voluminous robe downward at the hips, and pulled the shawl a little higher on her shoulders. She crossed her arms at the wrists and pressed her hands modestly against her collarbones, and scurried silently past the bathroom, down the long hall to the foyer. Bitty was in the kitchen and Sam Bittelman was hanging up a damp trench coat on the hall tree.

“Mr. Bittelman—”

“Sam,” he corrected jovially. “Top of the morning to you, Miss Schmidt. It turned morning, y’know, ten minutes ago.”

“Oh dear yes, I know it’s late,” she whispered. “And I’m terribly sorry, really I am, I wouldn’t for the world trouble you. I mean, I *am* sorry, I don’t want to be a nuisance. Oh *dear!*” Her perennially frightened face crinkled with her small explosion of distress.

“Now you just tell me what’s troubling you, lady, and we’ll get it fixed,” he said warmly.

“You’re very kind. Very kind. It happens there is something. I mean, something to fix. In ... in my room.” She bent forward with this, as with a deep confidence.

“Well, let’s go have a look. Bitty!” Miss Schmidt put a shocked hand over her lips as he raised his voice. “I’m going to fix something for the lady. Be right with you.” He turned back to Miss Schmidt and made a jocular bow. “Lead on.”

“We mustn’t wake the ... anybody,” she reproved him, then blushed because she had. He only grinned, and followed her back to her room. She entered, opened the door as wide as it would go,

and self-consciously picked up the wastepaper basket and set it to hold the door open. She looked up from this task right into Sam's twinkling eyes, and sent up a prayer that he wouldn't tease her about it. One never knew what Sam was going to say; sometimes he was beyond understanding and sometimes he was just—awful. "The window," she said. "The blind."

He looked at it. "Oh, that again. Durn things are always getting the cords frayed." The venetian blind hung askew, the bottom slats almost vertical, leaving a lower corner of the window exposed. Sam tugged at the raising-cord. It was double; one part was jammed tight and the other ran free. He pulled it all the way out and ruefully exhibited the broken end. "See? That's it, all right. Have to see if I can't put in a new cord for you in the morning, if I can find one."

"In the morning? But—I mean, well, Mr. uh—Sam, what about now? That is, what am I going to *do*?"

"Why, just don't worry your pretty little head about it! Get your beauty-sleep, little lady, and by the time you're back from school tomorrow I'll have it—"

"You don't understand," she wailed softly, "I can't go to bed with it like that. That's why I waited up for you. I've tried everything. The drapes won't go across it and there's nothing to hang a towel to and the chair-back isn't high enough to cover it and—and—oh, *dear!*!"

"Oh-h-h."

Struck by something in his single, slow syllable, she looked sharply at him. There was something—what was it? like a hum in the room. But it wasn't a sound. He hadn't changed ... and yet there was something in his eyes she had never seen before. She had never seen it in anyone's eyes. About Sam Bittelman there had always been a leisurely strength, and it was there now but easier, stronger, more comforting than ever. To her, with her multiple indecisions, unsertainties, his friendly certitude was more wondrous than a halo might have been. He said, "Just what bothers you about the window?"

Her usual self moved quite clearly to indicate, indignantly, that part of the window was uncovered and surely that spoke for itself; yet her usual self was unaccountably silent, and she gave him his answer: "Somebody might look *in*!"

"You know what's outside that window?"

"Wh— Oh. Oh, the back of the garage."

"So nobody's going to see in. Well now, suppose there was no garage, and you turned out your lights. Could anybody see in?"

"N-no ..."

"But it still bothers you."

"Yes, of course it does." She looked at the triangle of exposed glass, black with night outside, and shuddered. He leaned against the doorpost and scratched his head. "Let me ask you something," he said, as if her permission might make a difference. "S'pose we took away the garage, and you forgot and left your light on, *and* somebody saw you?"

She squeaked.

"Really bothers you, don't it?" He laughed easily. And instead of infuriating her, the sound flooded her with comfort. "What exactly is bothersome about that, aside from the fact that it's bothersome?"

"Why ... why," she said breathlessly, "I know what *I'd* think of a hussy that would parade around that way with the lights on and —"

"I didn't say parade. Nor 'prance,' either, which is the other word people use, I don't know why. So what really bothers you is what some peepin' Tom might think, hm? Now, Miss Schmidt, is that really anything to worry about? What do you care what he thinks you are? Don't you know what you are?" He paused, but she had nothing to say. "You ever sleep naked?"

She gasped, and, round-eyed, shook her head.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Why I— I—" She had to answer him; she had to. Fear rose like a thin column of smoke within her, and then a swift glance at his open, friendly face dispelled it completely. It was extraordinary, uncomfortable, exhilarating, disturbing, exciting all at once. He compelled her and comforted her at the same time.

She found her voice and answered him. "I just couldn't sleep ... like that. Suppose there was a fire?"

"Who said that?" he snapped.

"I beg your—"

"Who said 'suppose there's a fire?' Who told you that?"

"Why, I suppose it—yes, it was my mother."

"Not your idea then. Figured as much. 'Thou shalt not kill.' Do you believe that?"

“Of course!”

“You do. How old were you when you learned that?”

“I don’t—know. All children—”

“Children seven, eight, nine? All right. How old were you when you were taught not to unpin your diapers? Not to let anyone *see* you?”

She did not answer but the answer was there.

“Wouldn’t you say you’d learned ‘thou shalt not expose thy body’ earlier, better, more down-deep than ‘thou shalt not kill?’”

“I—yes.”

“Do you realize it’s a deeper commandment with you than any of the Ten? And aside from right-’n-wrong, isn’t it deeper than the deepest, strongest one of all—save thyself? Can’t you see yourself dying under a bush rather than walk naked out on the road and flag a car? ‘Suppose there’s a fire?’ Can’t you see yourself burn to death rather’n jump out a window without your bathrobe?”

She didn’t answer except from her round eyes and her whole heart.

“Does that make any *sense*, to believe a thing like that?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “I—have to think.”

Surprisingly, he said, “Retroactive.” He pointed to the window. “What can we do about that?” he asked.

Absently she glanced at it. “Never mind it tonight, Mr. Bittelman.”

“Sam. Okay. Goodnight, little lady.”

She felt herself, abruptly, tottering on the edge of a bottomless pit. He had walked in here and disoriented her, ripped into shreds a whole idea-matrix which had rested undisturbed in the foundations of her thinking, like a cornerstone. Just at this startled second she had not made the admission, but she would have to admit to herself soon that she must think “retroactive,” as he had put it, and that when she did she would find that the clothes convention was not the only one she would have to reappraise. The inescapable, horizonless, unfamiliar task loomed over her like a black cloud—her only comfort, her only handhold was Sam Bittelman, and he was leaving. “No!” she cried. “No! No! No!”

He turned back, smiling, and that magic happened again, his sureness and ease. She stood gasping as if she had run up a hill.

"It's all right, little lady."

"Why did you tell me all this? Why?" she asked pathetically.

"You know something? I didn't tell you a thing," he said. "I just asked questions. They were all questions you could've asked yourself. And what's got you scared is answers—answers that came from here—" He put a gentle knuckle against her damp forehead. "—and not from me. You've lived with it all quite a while; you got nothing to fear from it now." And before she could answer he had waved one capable hand, winked, and was gone.

For a long time she stood there, trembling and afraid to think. At last she let her open eyes see again, and although they saw nothing but the open door, it was as if some of Sam's comfort slipped in with vision. She turned around, and around again, taking in the whole room and reaping comfort and more comfort from the walls, as if Sam had hung it for her to gather like ripe berries. She put it all in the new empty place within her, not to fill, but at least to be there and to live with until she could get more. Suddenly her gaze met the silly little wastebasket sitting against the door, holding it open, and to her utter astonishment she laughed at it. She picked it up, shook her head at it as if it had been a ridiculous puppy which had been eating her talcum powder; she even spanked it lightly, once, and put it down, and closed the door. She got into bed and put out the light without even looking at the window.

V

"Aw, you shouldn't!" cried Bitty with a joyous sort of chagrin as she pushed open Sue Martin's door. "Here I've got all your fresh linen and you've went and made the bed!"

Sue Martin, sleep-tousled and lovely in a dark negligee, rose from the writing desk. "I'm sorry, Bitty. I forgot it was Thursday."

"Well, Thursday it is," the older woman scolded, "and now I'll have to do it up all over again. Young lady, I've told and *told* you I'll take care of the room."

"You have plenty to do," Sue smiled. "Here, I'll help. What's Robin up to?"

Together they took down the spread, the light blanket, then the sheets from the big double bed. "Kidnapped by that young idiot O'Banion again. He's driving out to the new project over

Huttonville way and thought Robin might want to see the bulldozers."

"Robin loves bulldozers. He's not an idiot."

"He's an idiot," said Bitty gruffly, apparently needing no translation of the two parts of Sue's statement. "Time this was turned, since we're both here," she said, swatting the mattress.

"All right," Sue Martin loosely folded the spread and blanket and carried them to the chest. "Robin just loves him."

"So do you."

Sue's eyes widened. She shot a look at the other woman, but Bitty's back was turned as she bent over the bed. When she spoke, her voice was perfectly controlled. "Yes, for some time." She went to stand beside Bitty and they laid hold of the mattress straps. "Ready?" Together they heaved and the mattress rose up, teetered for a moment on edge, and fell back the other way. They pulled it straight.

"Well, what are you doing about it?" Bitty demanded.

Sue found her eyes captured by Bitty's for a strange moment. She saw herself, in a flash of analog, walking purposefully away from some tired, dark place toward something she wanted; and as she walked there appeared humming softly behind her, around her, something like a moving wall. She had a deep certainty that she could not stop nor turn aside; but that as long as she kept moving at the same speed, in the same direction, the moving wall could not affect her. She—and it—were moving toward what she wanted, just as fast as she cared to go. While this was the case, she was not being restrained or compelled, helped nor hindered. So she would not fear this thing, fight it or even question it. It could not possibly change anything. In effect, irresistible as it might be, it need not and therefore did not exist for her. Here and now, some inexplicable something had happened to make it impossible not to answer Bitty's questions—and this compulsion was of no moment at all for her as long as Bitty asked questions she wanted to answer. "What are you doing about it?" was such a question.

"Everything I should do," said Sue Martin. "Nothing at all." Bitty grunted noncommittally. She took a folded sheet from the top of the highboy and shook it out across the bed. Sue Martin went round to the other side and caught it. She said, "He has to know why, that's all, and he can't do anything or say anything

until he does know."

"Why what?" Bitty asked bluntly.

"Why he loves me."

"Oh—you know that, do you?"

This was one question, compulsion or no, that Sue Martin did not bother to answer. It was on the order of "Is this really a bed?" or "Is it Thursday?" So Bitty asked another: "And you're just waiting, like a little edelweiss on an Alp, for him to climb the mountain and pick you?"

"Waiting?" Sue repeated, puzzled.

"You're not doing anything about it, are you?"

"I'm being myself," said Sue Martin. "I'm living my life. What I have to give him—anyone who's *right* for me—is all I am, all I do for the rest of my life. As long as he wants something more, or something different, nothing can happen." She closed her eyes for a moment. "No, I'm not waiting, exactly. Put it this way: I know how to be content with what I am and what I'm doing. Either Tony will knock down that barrier he's built, or he won't. Either way I know what's going to happen, and it's good."

"That wall—why don't you take a pickax and beat it down?"

She flashed the older woman a smile, "He'd defend it. Men get very fond of the things they defend, especially when they find themselves defending something stupid."

Bitty shook out the second sheet. "And don't you have any of his kind of trouble—wondering *why* you love him?"

Sue Martin laughed. "Wouldn't we live in a funny world if we had to understand everything that was real, or it wouldn't exist? It's always good to know *why*. It isn't always necessary. Tony'll find that out one day." She sobered. "Or he won't. Hand me a pillowslip."

They finished their task in silence. Bitty bundled up the old linen and trudged out. Sue Martin stood looking after her. "I hope she wasn't disappointed," she murmured, and, "I don't think so ... and what did I mean by that?"

VI

One morning Mary Haunt opened her eyes and refused to believe them. For a moment she lay still looking at the window numbly; there was something wrong with it, and a wrong feeling about

the whole room. Then she identified it: there was sunlight streaming in and down through the venetian blind where no sunlight should be at her rising time. She snatched her watch off the night table and squinted at it, and moaned. She reared up in bed and peered at the alarm clock, then turned and punched furiously at the pillow. She bounded out of bed, struggled into her yellow robe, and flew out of the room with her bare feet slapping angrily down the long corridor. Sam Bittelman was sitting at the kitchen table peering at the morning paper over the tops of his black rimmed reading-glasses. Bitty was at the sink. "What 'm I, the forgotten man or something?" Mary Haunt demanded harshly.

Sam put down his paper and only then began to remove his gaze from it. "M-m-m? Oh, good morning, gal." Bitty went on with her business.

"Good *nothing*! Don't you know what time it is?"

"Sure do."

"What's the big fat idea leaving me to sleep like this? You know I got to get to work in the morning."

"Who called you four times?" said Bitty without turning around or raising her voice. "Who went in and shook you, and got told *get out of my room* for it?"

Mary Haunt poised between pace and pace, between syllables. Now that Bitty mentioned it, she *did* half-remember a vague hammering somewhere, a hand on her shoulder ... but that was a dream, or the middle of the night or—or had she really chased the old lady out? "Arrgh," she growled disgustedly. She stamped out into the foyer and snatched up the phone. She dialed. "Get me Muller," she snapped at the voice that answered.

"Muller," said the phone.

"Mary Haunt here. I'm sick today. I'm not coming in."

"So with this phone call," said the telephone, "I'll notice."

"Why you lousy Heine, without me you couldn't run a yo-yo, let alone a radio station!" she shouted, but she had hung up before she started to shout.

She padded back into the kitchen and sat down at the table. "Got coffee?"

Bitty, still with her back turned, nodded in the appropriate direction and said, "On the stove," but Sam folded his paper and got up. He went to the stove, touched the pot briefly with the

back of his hand, picking up a cup and saucer on the way. "You'll want milk."

"You know better than that," she said, arching her lean body. While she poured herself a cup, Sam sat down at the other end of the table. He leaned his weight on his elbows, his forearms and worn hands flat on the table. Something like the almost-silent whisper from a high-speed fan made her look up. "What are you looking at?"

He didn't answer her question. "Why do you claim to be twenty-two?" he asked instead, and quick as the rebound of billiard ball from cue ball, propelled by hostility, inclusive as buckshot, her reply jetted up: "*What's it to you?*" But it never reached her lips; instead she said, "I have to," and then sat there astounded. Once she had worn out a favored phonograph record, knew every note, every beat of it, and she had replaced it; and for once the record company had made a mistake and the record was not what the label said it was. The first half-second of that new record was like this, a moment of expectation and stunned disbelief. This was even more immediate and personal, however; it was like mounting ten steps in the dark and finding, shockingly, that there were only nine in the flight. From this moment until she left the kitchen, she was internally numb and frightened, yet fascinated, as her mind formed one set of words and others came out.

"You have to," asked Sam mildly, "the way you have to be in the movies? You just *have* to?"

The snarl, *have I kept it a secret?* came out, "It's what I want."

"Is it?"

There didn't seem to be any answer to that, on any level. She waited, tense.

"What you're doing—the job at the radio station—living here in this town instead of someplace else—all of it; is what you're doing the best way to get what you want?"

Why else would I put up with it all—the town, the people—you? But she said, "I think so." Then she said, "I've thought so."

"Why don't you talk to young Halvorsen? He might be able to find something you'd do even better'n going to Hollywood."

"I don't *want* to find anything better!" This time there was no confusion.

From the other end of the room, Bitty asked, "Were you always

so all-fired pretty, Mary Haunt? Even when you were a little girl?"

"Everyone always said so."

"Ever wish you weren't?"

Are you out of your mind? "I ... don't think so," she whispered.

Gently, Sam asked her, "Did they throw you out, gal? Make you leave home?"

Defiantly, defensively, *They treated me like a little princess at home, like a piece of fine glassware. They carried my books and felt good all day if I smiled. They did what I wanted, what they thought I wanted, at home or in town. They acted as if I was too good to walk that ground, breathe that air, they jumped at the chance to take advantage of being at the same place at the same time; they did everything for me they could think of doing, as if they had to hurry or I'd be gone. Throw me out? Why, you old fool!* "I left home my own self," she said. "Because I had to, like—" But here words failed her, and she determined not to cry, and she determined not to cry, and she cried.

"Better drink your coffee."

She did, and then she wanted something to eat with it, but couldn't bear to sit with these people any longer. She sniffed angrily. "I don't know what's the matter with me," she said. "I never overslept before."

"Long as you know what you want," said Sam, and whether that was the stupid, non-sequitur remark of a doddering dotard, or something quite different, she did not know. "Well," she said, rising abruptly; and then felt foolish because there was nothing else to say. She escaped back to her room and to bed, and huddled there most of the day dully regarding the two coddled ends of her life, pampering in the past and pampering in the future, while trying to ignore today with its empty stomach and its buzzing head.

VII

During Prohibition it had been a restaurant, in that category which is better than just "nice" but not as good as "exclusive"; the town was too small then to have anything exclusive. Now it was a bar as well, and although there was imitation Carrara on some walls, and a good deal of cove-lighting, the balcony had

never been altered and still boasted the turned-spoke railing all the way around, looking like a picket fence that had gone to heaven. There was a little service bar up there, and a man could stay all evening watching what went on down below without being seen. This was what Tony O'Banion was doing, and he was doing it because he had felt like a drink and had never been to the club before, and he wanted to see what kind of place it was and what Sue Martin did there; and every one of these reasons were superficial—if he preceded them with “Why,” he felt lost. Within him were the things he believed, about the right sort of people, about background, breeding, and blood. Around him was this place, as real as the things he believed in. *Why* he was here, why he wanted a drink just now, why he wanted to see the place and what happened in it—this was a bridge between one reality and the other, and a misty, maddening, nebulous bridge it was. He drank, and waited to see her emerge from the small door by the bandstand, and when she did he watched her move to the piano and help the pianist, a disheveled young man, stack and restack and shuffle his music, and he drank. He drank, and watched her go to the cashier and spend a time over a ledger and a pile of checks. She disappeared through the swinging doors into the kitchen, and he drank; he drank and she came out talking to a glossy man in a tuxedo, and he winced when they laughed.

At length the lights dimmed and the glossy man introduced her and she sang in a full, pleasant voice something about a boy next door, and someone else played an accordion which was the barest shade out of tune with the piano. Then the piano had a solo, and the man sang the last chorus, after which the lights came up again and he asked the folks to stick around for the main show at ten sharp. Then the accordion and the piano began to make dance music. It was all unremarkable, and Tony didn’t know why he stayed. He stayed, though: “Waiter! Do it again.”

“Do it twice.”

Tony spun around. “Time someone else bought, hm?” said Sam Bittelman. He sat down.

“Sam! Well, sit down. Oh, you *are*.” Tony laughed embarrassedly. His tongue was thick and he was immeasurably glad to see the old man. He was going to wonder why until he remembered that he’d sworn off wondering why just now. He was going to ask what Sam was doing there and then decided Sam

would only ask him the same, and it was a question he didn't want to fool with just now. Yes he did.

"I'm down here slumming in the fleshpots and watching the lower orders cavorting and carousing," he blurted, making an immense effort to be funny. He wasn't funny. He sounded like a little snob, and a tight little snob at that.

Sam regarded him gravely, not disapproving, not approving.
"Sue Martin know you're here?"

"No."

"Good."

The waiter came just in time; Sam's single syllable had given him a hard hurt; but for all the pain, it was an impersonal thing, like getting hit by a golfer on his backswing. When the waiter had gone Sam asked quietly, "Why don't you marry the girl?"

"What're ya—kidding?"

Sam shook his head. O'Banion looked into his eyes and away, then down at Sue Martin where she leaned against the piano, leafing through some music. *Why don't you marry the girl?* "You mean if she'd have me?" It was not the way he felt, but it was something to say. He glanced at Sam's face, which was still waiting for a real answer. All right then. "It wouldn't be right."

"Right?" Sam repeated.

O'Banion nipped his thick tongue in the hope it might wake his brains up. The rightness of it ... vividly he recalled his Mother's words on the subject: "Aside from the amount of trouble you'll save yourself, Anthony, you must remember that it's not only your right, it's your *duty* not to marry beneath your class. Fine hounds, fine horses, fine humans, my dear; it's breeding that matters." That was all very well, but how to say it to the kind old man, himself obviously a manual worker all his life? O'Banion was not a cruel man, and he was well aware that coarse origins did not always mean dull sensibilities. Actually, some of these people were very sensitive. So he made a genuinely noble try at simultaneous truth and kindness: "I've always felt it's wiser to form relationships like that with—uh—people of one's own kind."

"You mean, people with as much money as you got?"

"No!" O'Banion was genuinely shocked. "That's no longer a standard to go by, and it probably never was, not by itself." He laughed ruefully and added, "Besides, there hasn't been any money in my family since I can remember. Not since 1929."

"Then what's your kind of people?"

How? How? "It's ... a way of life," he said at length. That pleased him. "A way of life," he repeated, and took a drink. He hoped Sam wouldn't pursue the subject any further. Why examine something when you're content with it the way it is?

"Why are you here anyway, boy?" Sam asked. "I mean, in this town instead of in the city, or New York or some place?"

"I'm good for a junior partnership in another year or so. Then I can transfer as a junior partner to a big firm. If I'd gone straight to the city it would take me twice as long to get up there."

Sam nodded. "Pretty cute. Why the law? I always figured lawyer's work was pretty tough and pretty dusty for a young man."

His Mother had said, "Of course the law field's being invaded by all sorts of riffraff now—but what isn't? However, it's still possible for a gentleman to do a gentleman's part in law." Well, that wouldn't do. He'd have to go deeper. He averted his eyes from old Sam's casual penetration and said, "Tough, yes. But there's something about law work ..." He wondered if the old man would follow this. "Look, Sam, did it ever occur to you that the law is the biggest thing ever built? It's bigger'n bridges, bigger'n buildings because they're all built *on* it. A lawyer's a part of the law, and the law is part of everything else—everything we own, the way we run governments, everything we make and carry and use. Ever think of that?"

"Can't say I did," said Sam. "Tell me something—the law, is it finished?"

"Finished?"

"What I mean, this rock everything's built on, how solid is it? Is it going to change much? Didn't it change a whole lot to get the way it is?"

"Well, sure! Everything changes a lot while it's growing up."

"Ah. It's grown up."

"Don't you think it has?" O'Banion asked with sudden truculence.

Sam grinned easily. "Shucks, boy, I don't think. I just ask questions. You were saying about 'your sort of people': you think you-all *belong* in the law?"

"Yes!" said O'Banion, and saw immediately that Sam would not be satisfied with so little. "We do in this sense," he said earnestly.

"All through the ages men have worked and built and—and owned. And among them there rose a few who were born and bred and trained to—to—" He took another drink, but it and the preceding liquor seemed not to be helping him. He wanted to say *to rule* and he wanted to say *to own*, but he had wit enough about him to recognize that Sam would misunderstand. So he tried again. "Born and bred to—live that—uh—way of life I mentioned before. It's to the interest of those few people to invest their lives in things as they are, to keep them that way; in other words, to work for and uphold the law." He leaned back with a flourish that somehow wasn't as eloquent as he had hoped and very nearly upset his glass to boot.

"Don't the law contradict itself once in a while?"

"Naturally!" O'Banion's crystallizing concept of the nobility of his work was beginning to intoxicate him more than anything else. "But the very nature of our courts is a process of refinement, constant purification." He leaned forward excitedly. "Look, laws are dreams, when they're first thought of—inspirations! There's something ... uh ... holy about that, something beyond the world of men. And that's why when the world of men comes into contact with it, the wording of the inspiration has to be redone in the books, or interpreted in the courtroom. That's what we mean by 'precedents'—that's what the big dusty books are for, to create and maintain consistency under the law."

"What about justice?" murmured Sam, and then quickly, as if he hadn't meant to change the subject, "That's not what I meant by contradiction", counselor. I mean all laws that all men have dreamed up and lived by and got themselves killed over. Tell me something, counselor, is there even one single law so right for men that it shows up in every country that is or was?"

O'Banion made a startled sound, as half a dozen excellent examples flashed into his mind at once, collided, and, under the first examination, faded away.

"Because," said Sam in a voice which was friendly and almost apologetic, "if there ain't such a law, you might say every set of laws ever dreamed up, even the sets that were bigger and older and lasted longer than the one you practice, even any set you can imagine for the future—they're all goin' to contradict one another some way or other. So, who's really to say whose set of laws are right—or fit to build anything on, or breed up a handful of folks

fit to run it?"

O'Banion stared at his glass without touching it. For an awful moment he was totally disoriented; a churning pit yawned under his feet and he must surely topple into it. He thought wildly, you can't leave me here, old man! You'd better say something else, and fast, or I ... or I ...

There was a sort of pressure in his ears, like sound too high-pitched for humans. Sam said softly, "You really think Sue Martin ain't good enough for you?"

"I didn't say that, I didn't say that!" O'Banion blurted, hoarse with indignation, and fright, and relief as well. He shuddered back and away from the lip of this personal precipice and looked redly at the composed old face. "I said different, too different, that's all. I'm thinking of her as well as—"

For once Sam bluntly interrupted, as if he had no patience with what O'Banion was saying. "What's different?"

"Background, I told you. Don't you know what that is?"

"You mean the closer a girl's background is to yours, the better chance you'd have bein' happy the rest of your life?"

"Isn't it obvious?" The perfect example popped into his mind, and he speared a finger out and downward toward the piano. "Did you hear what she was singing just before you got here? 'The boy next door.' Don't you understand what that really means, why that song, that idea, hits home to so many people? Everybody understands that; it's the appeal of what's familiar, close by—the similar background I'm talking about!"

"You have to shout?" chuckled Sam. Sobering, he said, "Well, counselor, if you're goin' to think consistently, like you said, couldn't you dream up a background even more sim'lar than your next-door neighbor?"

O'Banion stared at him blankly, and old Sam Bittelman asked, "Are you an only child, counselor?"

O'Banion closed his eyes and saw the precipice there waiting; he snapped them open in sheer self-defense. His hands hurt and he looked down, and slowly released them from the edge of the table. He whispered, "What are you trying to tell me?"

His bland face the very portrait of candor, Sam said, "Shucks, son, I couldn't tell you a thing, not a blessed thing. Why, I don't know anything you don't know to tell you! I ain't asked you a single question you couldn't've asked yourself, and the answers

were all yours, not mine. Hey ..." he breathed, "you better come along home. You wouldn't want Miz Martin to see you looking the way you do right now."

Numbly, Anthony Dunglass O'Banion followed him out.

VIII

It was hot, so hot that apparently even Bitty felt it, and after supper went to sit on the verandah. It was very late when at last she came in to do the dishes, but she went ahead without hurrying, doing her usual steady, thorough job. Sam had gone to bed, Mary Haunt was sulking in her room after yet another of those brief, violent brushes with Miss Schmidt. O'Banion was crouching sweatily over some law-books in the parlor, and Halvorsen—

Halvorsen was standing behind her, just inside the kitchen. On his face was a mixture of expressions far too complicated to analyze, but simple in sum—a sort of anxious wistfulness. In his hands was a paper sack, the mouth of which he held as if it were full of tarantulas. His stance was peculiar, strained, and off-balance, one foot advanced, his shoulders askew; his resolution had equated with his diffidence and immobilized him, and there he stayed like a bee in amber.

Bitty did not turn. She went right on working steadily, her back to him, until she finished the pot she was scouring. Still without turning, she reached for another and said, "Well, come on in, Philip."

Halvorsen literally sagged as her flat, matter-of-fact voice reached him, shattering with its exterior touch his interior deadlock. He grinned, or just bared his teeth, and approached her. "You *do* have eyes in the back of your head."

"Nup." She rapped once with her knuckle on the windowpane over the sink. Night had turned it to black glass. Halvorsen watched the little cone of suds her hand had left, then refocused his eyes on the image in the glass—vivid, the kitchen and everything in it. Hoarsely, he said, "I'm disappointed."

"I don't keep things I don't need," she said bluntly, as if they'd been talking about apple-corers. "What's on your mind? Hungry?"

"No." He looked down at his hands, tightened them still more on the bag. "No," he said again, "I have, I wanted ..." He noticed

that she had stopped working and was standing still, inhumanly still, with her hands in the dishwater and her eyes on the windowpane. "Turn around, Bitty."

When she would not, he supported the bottom of the paper bag with one hand and with the other scrabbled it open. He put his hands down inside it. "Please," he tried to say, but it was only a hiss.

She calmly shook water off her hands, wiped them on a paper towel. When she turned around her face was eloquent—as always, and only because it always was. Its lines were eloquent, and the shape of her penetrating eyes, and the light in them. As a photograph or a painting such a face is eloquent. It is a frightening thing to look into one and realize for the first time that behind it nothing need be moving. Behind the lines of wisdom and experience and the curved spoor of laughter, something utterly immobile could be waiting. Only waiting.

Halvorsen said, "I think all the time." He wet his lips. "I never stop thinking, I don't know how. It's ... there's something wrong."

Flatly, "What's wrong?"

"You, Sam," said Halvorsen with difficulty. He looked down at the bag over his hand. She did not. "I've had the ... feeling ... for a long time now. I didn't know what it was. Just something wrong. So I talked to O'Banion. Miss Schmidt too. Just, you know, talk." He swallowed. "I found out. What's wrong, I mean. It's the way you and Sam talk to us, all of us." He gestured with the paper bag. "*You never say anything!* You only ask questions!"

"Is that all?" asked Bitty good-humoredly.

"No," he said, his eyes fixed on hers. He stepped back a pace.

"Aren't you afraid that paper bag'll spoil your aim, Philip?"

He shook his head. His face turned the color of putty.

"You didn't go out and buy a gun just for me, did you?"

"You see?" he breathed. "Questions. You see?"

"You already had it, didn't you, Philip? Bought it for something else?"

"Stay away from me," he whispered, but she had not moved. He said, "Who are you? What are you after?"

"Philip," she said gently—and now she smiled. "Philip—*why do you want to be dead?*"

Part Two

SPECIAL ENTRY IN FIELD EXPEDITION [NOTEBOOK]: Since it is now [my] intention to prefer charges against [my] [partner-teammate] [Smith] and to use these [notes] as a formal [document] in the matter, [I] shall now summarize in detail the particulars of the case: [We] have been on Earth for [expression of time-units] on a field expedition to determine whether or not the dominant species here possesses the Synapse known to our [catalog] as Beta sub Sixteen, the master [computer] [at home] having concluded that without the Synapse, this Earth culture must become extinct. Needless to [say] [we] are here to observe and not to interfere; to add to the [memory-banks] of the master [computer] only, it being a matter of no significance otherwise.

On arrival [we] set up the usual [detectors], expecting to get our information in a [expression of very short time-unit] or so; but to our [great astonishment] the readings on the [kickshaw], the [gimmick] and our high-sensitivity [snivvy] were mixed; it appears that this culture possessed the Synapse but did not use it. [!!!]

[We] therefore decided to conduct a [microcosmic] observation on each of the specimens in a small group, under [laboratory] conditions, to discover to what extent the Synapse exists in them, and under what circumstances it might become functional. We have set up for this purpose [the analog of] a [], or [residence], called, in Terrestrial terms, *small town boarding house*, and have attracted to it:

PHILIP HALVORSEN, a young vocational guidance expert, who has a ceaselessly active analytical mind, and a kind of instinct for illogic: he knows when a person or situation is, in some way, wrong, and will not rest until he finds out why. He has recently followed his own logic to the conclusion that he wants to be dead —and he can't find out why!... MARY HAUNT, a beautiful girl who claims to be twenty-two [and lies], and who wants to be a movie star with an ambition transcending all reason. She is employed in a very minor capacity at the local radio station, and is always angry at everyone.... ANTHONY DUNGLASS O'BANION, a young lawyer, deeply convinced that his family background, "breeding," "culture" and occupation set him apart from everyone else in town; he is desperately fighting a growing conviction that he is in love with ... SUE MARTIN, young widowed night-club hostess (whom O'Banion's Mother, if she

were here, would certainly refer to as a "woman of that sort"). Sue Martin, a woman of unusual equilibrium, loves O'Banion but will not submit herself to his snobbery and therefore keeps her feelings very much to herself.... Her young son ROBIN, who is three, and is friends with everyone everywhere including his invisible, "imaginary" playmates Boff and Googie. Robin's special friend is the lawyer O'Banion; they get along very well indeed.... Finally, MISS SCHMIDT, the high-school librarian, who is a soft-voiced, timid little rabbit of a woman, afraid of the world and abjectly obedient to propriety.

The retired couple who run the boarding house are SAM and BITTY BITTELMAN, wise, relaxed, helpful, observant. They are available always except for one day a month when they go out "for a ride."

That, in Terrestrial terms, is [our] laboratory setup. [We] installed a [widget] and [rigged-up] a [wadget] as complementary [observation- and-control] even though it meant using a [miserable] [inefficient] [old-fashioned] power supply on the [wadget], which has to be re[charged] every [equivalent of Earth month]. Everything proceeded satisfactorily until [Smith], plagued by what [I] can only, in the most cosmic breadth of generosity, call an excess of enthusiasm, insisted that [we] speed up our research by stimulating the Synapse in these specimens. In spite of [my] warnings and [my] caution, [he] [bulled] ahead giving [me] no choice but to assist [him] in re[wiring] the [machines] for this purpose. But let it be on the [record] that [I] specifically warned [him] of the dangers of revealing [our] presence here. [I] for [one] dread the idea of being responsible for the destruction of organized life. Even if only one of the specimens should detect [us], there is so much intercommunication in this small group that it would be virtually impossible to remove or destroy one without alerting and disturbing all. The least effect would be to negate all [our] efforts so far; the most is something [I] cannot [ethically] live with.

Under these [unhappy] circumstances [we] proceeded with the stimulation; Old Sam Bittelman went to Miss Schmidt's room when she reported her venetian blind broken and unable to close. She suddenly found it impossible not to answer Sam's questions, which probed at the very roots of her timidity. Shocked to these roots, but more thoughtful than she had ever been in her life,

before, she went to bed forgetting the blind and thinking about the fact that her conditioning to keep her body covered was more deeply instilled into her than *Thou shalt not kill*—and other, equally unsettling concepts.

Mary Haunt overslept, for the very first time, and went into the kitchen, furious. Sam and Bitty were there, and suddenly the girl *had* to answer the questions they shot at her. She escaped quickly, but spent the rest of the day in bed, miserable and disoriented, wondering if, after all, she did want Hollywood....

Anthony O'Banion went down to the night club where Sue Martin worked, and sat out of sight on the balcony. Suddenly Sam Bittelman was at the table with him, asking him deeply troubling questions about the law and why he practiced it, about his convictions of blood and breeding, and about his feelings for Sue Martin. Dizzied and speechless, O'Banion was led home by kind old Sam.

Bitty found Sue Martin alone in her room one morning, and asked her some pointed questions, all of which Sue answered with ease, quite undisturbed, quite willing. Yes, she loved O'Banion. No, she wouldn't do anything about it; that was O'Banion's problem. Sue Martin was no trouble at all to Bitty....

Late one hot evening Halvorsen walked into the kitchen with a gun in his hand, saying there was something wrong, something he couldn't name ... but "*Who are you and what do you want?*" Bitty calmly asked him why he had bought a gun: "*It was for yourself, wasn't it, Philip? Why do you want to be dead?*" [I] submit that [Smith] is guilty of carelessness and [unethical] conduct. [I] see no solution but to destroy this specimen and perhaps the others. [I] declare that this situation has arisen only because [Smith] ignored [my] clearly [stated] warning. As [I] [write], this alerted, frightened specimen stands ready to commit violence on [our] [equipment] and thereby itself. [I] hereby serve notice on [Smith] that [he] got [us] into this and [he] can []ing well get [us] out.

IX

"Why do you want to be dead?"

Phil Halvorsen stood gaping at the old woman, and the gun, still shrouded in its silly paper bag, began whispering softly as he

trembled. The butt fitted his hand as his hand fitted the butt; *It's holding me*, he thought hysterically, knowing clearly that his hysteria was a cloud, a cloak, a defense against that which he was not equipped to think about ... well, maybe not ready to think about; but how had she known?

For nearly two days he had been worrying and gnawing at this sense of wrongness about him. Back and back he would come to it, only to reach bafflement and kick it away angrily; not eating enough, hardly sleeping at all; *let me sleep first!* something wailed within him, and as he sensed it he kicked it away again: more hysteria, not letting him think. And then a word from O'Banion, a phrase from Miss Schmidt, and his own ragbag memory: The Bittelmans never said—they always asked. It was as if they could reach into a man's mind, piece together questions from the unused lumber stored there, and from it build shapes he couldn't bear to look at. *How many terrible questions have I locked away?* And has she broken the lock? He said, "Don't ... ask me that.... Why did you ask me that?"

"Well, why ever not?"

"You're a ... you can read my mind."

"Can I?"

"Say something!" he shouted. The paper bag stopped whispering. He thought she noticed it.

"Am I reading your mind," she asked reasonably, "if I see you walk in here the way you did looking like the wrath o' God, holding that thing out in front of you and shying away from it at the same time, and then tell you that if you accidentally pull the trigger you might have to die for it? Read minds? Isn't it enough to read the papers?"

Oh, he thought.... Oh-h. He looked at her sharply. She was quite calm, waiting, leaving it to him. He knew, suddenly and certainly, that this woman could outthink him, outtalk him, seven ways from Sunday without turning a hair. This meant either that he was completely and embarrassingly wrong, or that her easy explanations weren't true ones ... which was the thing that had been bothering him in the first place. "Why did you say I bought the gun for something else?" he snapped.

She gave him that brief, very-warm smile. "Didn't say; I asked you, right? How could I really know?"

For one further moment he hesitated, and it came to him that if

this flickering doubt about her was justified, the chances were that a gun would be as ineffective as an argument. And besides ... it was like a silent current in the room, a sort of almost-sound, or the aural pressure he could feel sometimes when a car was braking near him; but here it came out feeling like comfort.

He let the bag fall until it swung from its mouth. He twisted it closed. "Will you—I mean," he bumbled, "I don't want it."

"Now what would I do with a gun?" she asked.

"I don't know. I just don't want it around. I can throw it away. I don't want to have anything to do with it. I thought maybe you could put it away somewhere."

"You know, you'd better sit down," said Bitty. She didn't exactly push him but he had to move back to get out of her way as she approached, and when the back of his knees hit a chair he had to sit down or fall down. Bitty continued across the kitchen, opened a high cupboard and put the bag on the topmost shelf. "Only place in the house Robin can't climb into."

"Robin. Oh yes," he said, seeing the possibilities. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"You'd better talk it out, Philip," she said in her flat, kind way. "You're fixing to bust wide open. I won't have you messing up my kitchen."

"There's nothing to talk about."

She paused on her way back to the sink, in a strange hesitation like one listening. Suddenly she turned and sat down at the table with him. "What did you want with a gun, Philip?" she demanded; and just as abruptly, he answered her, as if she had hurled something at him and it had bounced straight back into her waiting hands, "I was thinking about killing myself."

If he thought this would elicit surprise; or an exclamation, or any more questions, he was disappointed. She seemed only to be waiting, so he said, with considerably more care, "I don't know why I told you that but it came out right. I said I was thinking about doing it. I didn't say I was going to do it." He looked at her. Not enough? Okay then: "I couldn't be sure exactly what I was thinking until I bought a gun. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Why not?"

"I don't ever know exactly what I think unless I try it out. Or get all the pieces laid out ready to try."

“Or tell somebody?”

“I couldn’t tell anybody about this.”

“Did you try?”

“*Damn it!*” It was a whisper, but it emerged under frightening pressure. Then normally, “I’m sorry, Bitty, I’m real sorry. I suddenly got mad at the language, you know what I mean? You say something in words of one syllable and it comes out meaning something you never meant. I told you, ‘I couldn’t tell anybody about this.’ That sounds as if I knew all about it and was just shy or something. So you ask me, ‘Did you try?’ But what I really mean was that this whole thing, everything about it, is a bunch of —of feelings, and—well, crazy ideas *that I couldn’t tell anyone about.*”

Bitty’s rare smile flickered. “Did you try?”

“Well I’ll be. You’re worse than ever,” he said, this time without anger. “You *do* know what I’m thinking.”

“So what were you thinking?”

He sobered immediately. “Things … all crazy. I think all the time, Bitty, like a radio was playing all day, all night, and I can’t turn it off. Wouldn’t want to; wouldn’t know how to live without it. Ask me is it going to rain and off I go, thinking about rain, where it comes from, about clouds, how many different kinds there are; about air-currents and jet-streams and everything else you pick up reading those little paragraphs at the bottom of newspaper columns; about—”

“About why you bought a gun?”

“Huh? Oh … all right, all right, I won’t ramble.” He closed his eyes to hear his thoughts, and frowned at them. “Anyway, at the tail end of these run-downs is always some single thing that stops the chain—for the time. It might be the answer to some question I asked myself, or someone asks me, or it might just be as far as the things I know will take me.

“So one day a few weeks ago I got to thinking about guns, and never mind the way I went, but what I arrived at was the idea of a gun killing me, and then just the idea of being dead. And the more I thought, the more scared I got.”

After waiting what seemed to be long enough, Bitty said, “Scared.”

“It wasn’t kil— being dead that scared me. It was the feeling I had about it. I was glad about it. I wanted it. That’s what scared

me."

"Why do you want to be dead?"

"That's what I don't know." His voice fell. "Don't know, I just don't know," he mumbled. "So I couldn't get it out of my head and I couldn't make any sense out of it, and I thought the only thing I could do was to get a gun and load it and—get everything ready, to see how I felt then." He looked up at her. "That sounds real crazy, I bet."

Bitty shrugged. Either she denied the statement or it didn't matter. Halvorsen looked down again and said to his clenched hands, "I sat there in my room with the muzzle in my mouth and all the safeties off, and hooked my thumb around the trigger."

"Learn anything?"

His mouth moved but he couldn't find words to fit the movement. "Well," said Bitty sharply, "why didn't you pull it?"

"I just—" He closed his eyes in one of those long, inward-reading pauses. "—couldn't. I mean, *didn't*. I wasn't afraid, if that's what you want to know." He glanced at her and couldn't tell what she wanted to know. "Sitting there, that way, I came to realize that this wasn't the way it should happen," he said with some difficulty.

"What is the way?"

"Like this: if ever there was an earthquake, or I looked up and saw a safe falling on me, or some other thing like that, something from outside myself—I wouldn't move aside. I'd let it happen."

"Is there a difference between that and shooting yourself?"

"Yes!" he said, with more animation than he had shown so far. "Put it like this: there's part of me that's dead, and wants the rest of me dead. There's a part of me that's alive, and wants all of me alive." He looked that over and nodded at it. "My hand, my arm, my thumb on the trigger—they're alive. All the live parts of me want to help me go on living, d'you see? No live part should help the dead part get what it wants. The way it'll happen, the way it should happen, is not when I do something to make it happen. It'll be when I don't do something. I won't get out of the way, and that's it, and thanks for keeping the gun for me, it's no use to me." He stood up and found his eyes locked with hers, and sat right down again, breathing hard.

"Why do you want to be dead?" she asked flatly.

He put his head down on his hands and began to rock it slowly

to and fro.

“Don’t you want to know?”

Muffled, his voice came up from the edge of the table. “No.” Abruptly he sat up, staring. “No? What made me say no? Bitty,” he demanded, “what made me say that?”

She shrugged. He jumped up and began pacing swiftly up and down the kitchen. “I’ll be dogged,” he murmured once, and “Well, what d’ye kn—”

Bitty watched him, and catching him on a turn when their eyes could meet, she asked, “Well—why do you want to—”

“Shut up,” he said. He said it, not to her, but to any interruption. His figmentary signal-light, which indicated dissatisfaction, unrightness, was casting its glow all over his interior landscape. To be hounded half to death by something like this, then to discover that basically he didn’t want to investigate it ... He sat down and faced her, his eyes alight. “I don’t know yet,” he said, “but I will, I will.” He took a deep breath. “It’s like being chased by something that’s gaining on you, and you duck into an alley, and then you find it’s blind, there’s only a brick wall; so you sit down to wait, it’s all you can do. And all of a sudden you find a door in the wall. Been there all the time. Just didn’t look.”

“Why do you want to be dead?”

“B—because I—I shouldn’t be alive. Because the average guy—Different, that’s what I am, different, unfit.”

“Different, unfit.” Bitty’s eyebrows raised slightly. “They the same thing, Philip?”

“Well, sure.”

“You can’t jump like a kangaroo, you can’t eat grass raw like a cow—different. You unfit because you can’t do those things?”

He made an annoyed laugh. “Not that, not that. People, I mean.”

“You can’t fly a plane. You can’t sing like Sue Martin. You can’t spout law like Tony O’Banion. That kind of different?”

“No,” he said, and in a surge of anguish, “No, no! I can’t talk about it, Bitty!” He looked at her and again saw that rare, deep smile. He answered it in kind, but weakly, remembering that he had said that to her before. “This time I mean I can’t talk about such things to you. To a lady,” he said in abrupt, unbearable confusion.

"I'm no lady," said Bitty with conviction. Suddenly she punched his forearm; he thought it was the first time she had ever touched him. "To you I'm not even a human being. Not even another person. I mean it," she said warmly. "Have I asked you a single question you couldn't've asked yourself? Have I told you anything you didn't know?"

His peculiar linear mind cast rapidly back and up again. He felt an odd instant of disorientation. It was not unpleasant. Bitty said gently, "Go on talking to yourself, boy. Who knows—you might find yourself in good company."

"Aw ... thanks, Bitty," he mumbled. His eyes stung and he shook his head. "All right, all *right*, then ... it just came to me, one big flash, and I guess I couldn't sit here—here," he said, waving his arm to include the scrubbed, friendly kitchen, "and look at you, and think about these—uh this—all at once." He swallowed heavily. "Well, that time I told you about, that day I found out I wanted to be dead, it was like getting hit on the head. Right after that, only a couple of minutes, I got hit on the head just as hard by something else. I didn't know—want to know till now that they were connected, some way." He closed his eyes. "It was a theater, that rathole down across the Circle. You know. It—it hit out at me when I wasn't looking. It was all covered with ... pictures and—and it said SEE this and SEE that and SEE some dirty other thing, adults only, you know what I mean." He opened his eyes to see what Bitty was doing, but Bitty was doing nothing at all. Waiting. He turned his face away from her, and said indistinctly into his shoulder, "All my life those things meant nothing to me. *There!*" he shouted, "you see? Different, different!"

But she wouldn't see. Or she wouldn't see until he did, himself, more clearly. She still waited.

He said, "Down at work, there's a fellow, Scodie. This Scodie, he's a good man, really can turn out a day's work. I mean, he likes what he's doing, he cares. Except every time a girl goes by, everything stops. He snaps up out of what he's doing, he watches her. I mean, *every* time. It's like he can't help himself. He does it the way a cadet salutes an officer on the street. He does it like that crossing-guard on the toy train, that pops out of his little house every time his little light goes on. He watches until the girl's gone by, and then he says 'mmmyuh!' and looks over at me and winks."

"What do you do, every time?"

"Well, I—" He laughed uncertainly. "I guess I wink back at him and I say, mm-hm! But I know why I do it, it's because he expects me to; he'd think it was sort of peculiar if I didn't. But he doesn't do it for me; I don't expect anything of him one way or the other. He does it—" Words failed him, and he tried again. "Doing that, he's part of—everybody. What he does is the same thing every song on every radio says every minute. Every ad in every magazine does it if it possibly can, even if it means a girl in her underwear with stillson wrenches for sale." He leapt to his feet and began to pace excitedly. "You got to back off a little to see it," he told Bitty, who smiled behind his back. "You got to look at the whole thing all at once, to see how *much* there is of it, the jokes people tell—yeah, you got to laugh at them, whatever, you even have to know a couple, or they'll ... The window displays, the television, the movies ... somebody's writing an article about transistors or termites or something, and every once in a while he figures he's been away from it long enough and he has to say something about the birds and the bees and 'Gentlemen prefer.' Everywhere you turn the whole world's at it, chipping and chipping away at it—"

He stamped back to the table and looked into Bitty's face intently. "You got to back away and look at it all at once," he cautioned again. "I'm not in kindergarten, I know what it's all about. I'm not a woman-hater. I've been in love. I'll get married, some day. Go ahead and tell me I'm talking about one of the biggest, strongest, down-deep urges we have—I'll buy that. That's what I *mean*, that's what I'm *talking* about." His forehead was pink and shiny; he took out a crumpled handkerchief and batted at it. "So much of it, all around you, all the time, filling a big hungry need in average people. I don't mean the urge itself; I mean all this *reminding*, this what do you call it, indoctrination. It's a need or folks wouldn't stand for so much of it, comic books, lipstick, that air-jet in the floor at the funny house at the Fair." He thumped into his chair, panting. "Do you begin to see what I mean about *different*?"

"Do you?" asked Bitty, but Halvorsen didn't hear her; he was talking again. "Different, because I don't feel that hunger to be reminded, I don't need all that high-pressure salesmanship, I don't want it. Every time I tell one of my jokes, every time I wink

back at old Scodie, I feel like a fool, like some sort of liar. But you got to protect yourself; you can't let anyone find out. You know why? Because the average guy, the guy-by-the-millions that needs all that noise so much, he'll let you be the way he is, or he'll let you be ... I'm sorry, Bitty. Don't make me go into a lot of dirty details. You see what I mean, don't you?

"What do you mean?"

Irritated, he blew a single sharp blast from his nostrils. "Well, what I mean is, they'll let you be the way they are, or you have to be ... sick, crippled. You can't be anything else! You can't be Phil Halvorsen who isn't sick and who isn't crippled but who just doesn't naturally go around banging his antlers against the rocks so the whole world can hear it."

"So—that's what you mean by unfit?"

"That's why I wanted to be dead. I just don't think the way other people do; if I act the way other people do I feel ... feel guilty. I guess I had this piling up in me for years, and that day with the guns, when I found out what I wanted to do ... and then that theater-front, yawping over me like a wet mouth full of dirty teeth ..." He giggled foolishly. "Listen to me, will you ... Bitty, I'm sorry."

She utterly ignored this. "High-pressure salesmanship," she said.

"What?"

"You said it, I didn't.... Isn't hunger one of those big deep needs, Philip? Suppose you had a bunch of folks starving on an island and dropped them a ton of food—would they need high-pressure salesmanship?"

It was as if he stood at the edge of a bottomless hole—more, the very outer edge of the world, so close his very toes projected over the emptiness. It filled him with wonder; he was startled, but not really afraid, because it might well be that to fall down and down into that endless place might be a very peaceful thing. He closed his eyes and slowly, very slowly, came back to reality, the kitchen. Bitty, Bitty's words. "You mean ... the av—the ordin—you mean, people aren't really interested?"

"Not that interested."

He blinked; he felt as if he had ceased to exist in his world and had been plunked down in a very similar, but totally new one. It was far less lonely here.

He hit the table and laughed into Bitty's calm face. "I'm going to sleep," he said, and got up; and he knew she had caught his exact shade of meaning when she said gently, "Sure you can."

EXCERPT FROM FIELD EXPEDITION [NOTEBOOK]: [I] had thought up to now that in [Smith)'s [immorally] excessive enthusiasm and [bullheadedness] [I] had encountered the utmost in [irritants]. [I] was in [error]; [he] now surpasses these, and without effort. In the first place, having placated and outwitted the alerted specimen, [he] has destroyed [my] preliminary detailed [report] on him; this is [irritat]ing not only because it was done without consulting [me], not only because of the trouble [I] went to [write] it all up, but mostly because [he] is technically within [his] [ethics-rights]—the emergency created by [his] [bumbling mismanagement] no longer exists. [I] have [force]fully pointed out to [him] that it was only by the application of [my] kind of cautious resourcefulness that [he] succeeded, but [he] just [gloats]. [I] [most strongly affirm-and-bind-myself], the instant [we] get back home and are released from Expeditionary [ethic-discipline], [I] shall [bend] [his] []s over [his] [] and [tie a knot in] them.

[We] have now, no [credit-thanks] to [Smith], reached a point where all our specimens are in a state of [heavy] preconditioning of their unaccountably random Synapse Beta sub Sixteen. Being a synapse, it will of course come into full operation only on a reflexive level and in an extreme emergency, which [we] are now setting up.

Unless [Smith] produces yet more [stupidities], the specimens should live through this.

X

It had become impossibly hot, and very still. Leaves dropped at impossible angles, and still the dust lay on them. Sounds seemed too enervated to travel very far. The sky was brass all day, and at night, for want of ambition, the overcast was no more than a gauzy hood of haze.

It was the Bittelmanns' "day off" again, and without them the

spine had been snatched out of the household. The boarders ate pokily, lightly, at random, and somehow got through the time when there was nothing to do but sit up late enough to get tired enough to get whatever rest the temperature would permit. It was too hot, even, to talk, and no one attempted it. They drifted to their rooms to wait for sleep; they slumped in front of the fans and took cold showers which generated more heat than they dissipated. When at last darkness came, it was a relief only to the eyes. The household pulse beat slowly and slower; by eight o'clock it was library-quiet, by nine quite silent, so that the soft brushing of knuckles on Miss Schmidt's door struck her like a shout.

"Wh—who is it?" she quavered, when she recovered her breath.

"Sue."

"Oh—oh. Oh, do come in." She pulled the damp sheet tight up against her throat.

"Oh, you're in bed already. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry. It's all right."

Sue Martin swung the door shut and came all the way in. She was wearing an off-the-shoulder peasant blouse and a pleated skirt with three times more filmy nylon in it than one would guess until she turned, when it drifted like smoke. "My," said Miss Schmidt enviously. "You look cool."

"State of mind," Sue smiled. "I'm about to go to work and I wish I didn't have to."

"And Bitty's out. I'm honorary baby-sitter again."

"You're an angel."

"No, oh, no!" cried Miss Schmidt. "I wish everything I had to do was that easy. Why, in all the time I've known you, every time I've done it, I—I've had nothing to do!"

"He sleeps pretty soundly. Clear conscience, I guess."

"I think it's because he's happy. He smiles when he sleeps."

"Smiles? Sometimes he laughs out loud," said Sue Martin. "I was a little worried tonight, for a while. He was so flushed and wide-awake—"

"Well, it's hot."

"It wasn't that." Sue chuckled. "His precious Boff was all over the place, 'fixin' things,' Robin said. What he was fixing all over the walls and ceiling, Robin didn't say. Whatever it was, it's

finished now, though, and Robin's sound asleep. I'm sure you won't even have to go in. And Bitty ought to be home soon."

"You'll leave your door open?"

Sue Martin nodded and glanced up at the large open transom over Miss Schmidt's door. "You'll hear him if he so much as blinks.... I've got to run. Thanks so much."

"Oh, really, Mrs. M—uh, Sue. Don't thank me. Just run along."

"Good night."

Sue Martin slipped out, silently closing the door behind her. Miss Schmidt sighed and looked up at the transom. After Sue's light footsteps had faded away, she listened, listened as hard as she could, trying to pour part of herself through the transom, across the hall, through Sue Martin's open door. A light sleeper at any time, she knew confidently that she was on guard now and would wake if anything happened. If she slept at all in this sticky heat.

She might sleep, at that, she thought after a while. She shifted herself luxuriously, and edged to a slightly cooler spot on the bed. "That wicked Sam," she murmured, and blushed in the dark. But he had been right. A *nightgown* in weather like this?

Suddenly, she slept.

In O'Banion's room, there was a soft sound. He had put off taking a shower until suddenly he had used up his energy, and could hardly stir. I'll just rest my eyes, he thought, and bowed his head. The soft sound was made by his forehead striking the book.

Halvorsen lay rigid on his bed, staring at the ceiling. There, almost as if it was projected, was the image of a flimsy cylinder vomiting smoke. Go ahead, he thought, detachedly. Or go away. I don't care which. Before I talked to Bitty, I wanted you. Now, I don't care. Is that better? He closed his eyes, but the image was still there. He lay very quietly, watching the insides of his eyelids. It was like being asleep. When he was asleep the thing was there too.

Mary Haunt sat by her window, pretending it was cooler there than in bed. There was no anger in her, just now as she lay back and dreamed. The Big Break, the pillars of light at her premiere, her name two stories tall over a Broadway marquee—these had no place in this particular favorite dream. I'll do over Mom's room, she thought, dimity, this time, and full, full skirts on the vanity and the night table. She closed her eyes, putting herself in

Mom's room with such vividness that she could almost smell the cool faint odor of lavender sachets and the special freshness of sheets dried in the sun. Yes, and something else, outside the room, barely, just barely she knew bread was baking, so that the kitchen would be heavenly with it; the bread would dominate the spice-shelf for a while, until it was out of the oven and cooled. "Oh, Mom ..." she whispered. She lay still in her easy chair, holding and holding to the vision until this room, this house, this town didn't matter any more.

Some hours went by.

Robin floated in a luminous ocean of sleep where there was nothing to fear and where, if he just turned to look, there were love and laughter waiting for him. His left hand uncurled and he thrust the second and third fingers into his mouth. Somehow he was a big bulldozer with a motor that sounded like Mitster and tracks that clattered along like Coffeepot, and Boff and Googie were riding along with him and laughing. Then without effort he was a glittery Ferris wheel, but he could watch himself too in one of the cars, screaming his delight and leaning against Tonio's hard arm. All this, yet he was still afloat in that deep bright place where there was no fear, where love and laughter hid around some indescribable corner, waiting. Brighter, brighter. Warm, warm, warmer ... oh, hot *hot!*

XI

Miss Schmidt opened her eyes to an impossible orange glare and a roar like the end of the world. For one full second she lay still, paralyzed by an utter disbelief; no light could have become so bright, no sound could have risen to this volume, without waking her as it began. Then she found a way to focus her eyes against the radiance, and saw the flames, and in what was left to her of her immobile second, she explained the whole thing to herself and said redly, of course, of course; it's only a nightmare and *suppose there's a fire?* —and that's so *silly*, Sam— And then she was out of bed in a single bound, standing in the center of the room, face to flaming face with reality. Everything was burning— everything! The drapes had already gone and the slats of the venetian blind, their cords gone, were heaped on the floor, going like a campfire. Even as she watched the screen sagged and

crumpled, its pine frame glaring and spitting pitch through blistering paint. It fell outside.

Outside, outside! The window's open, you're on the ground floor; yes, and there on the chair, not burning yet, your bathrobe; take the robe and jump, quick!

Then, beyond belief, there was a second louder than the earth-filling roar, and different; fine hot powder and a hot hail of plaster showered on her shoulders; she looked up to see the main beam, right over her head, sag toward her and hang groaning, one part reaching to the other with broken flat fingers of splintered wood which gloved themselves in flame as she saw them. She cowered, and just then the handle of the door turned and a gout of smoke slammed it open and whisked out of sight in the updraft; and there in the hall stood Robin, grinding a fat little fist into one abruptly wakened eye. She could see his lips move, though she could hear nothing in this mighty bellow of sound. She knew it, though, and heard it clearly in her mind: "What's 'at noice?"

The beam overhead grumbled and again she was showered with plaster. She batted it off her shoulders, and whimpered. A great flame must have burst from the roof above her just then, for through the window she saw a brilliant glare reflected from the white clapboards of the garage wall outside. The glare tugged at her—*jump!* —and besides, her robe....

The beam thundered and began to fall. Now she must make a choice, in microseconds. The swiftest thought would not be fast enough to weigh and consider and decide; all that could matter now was what was inside her, throwing switches (some so worn and easy to move!). A giant was throwing them, and he was strong; his strength was a conditioning deeper than *thou shalt not kill*; he was a lesson learned before she had learned to love God, or to walk, or to talk. He was her mother's authority and the fear of all the hairy, sweaty, dangerous mysteries from which she had shielded herself all her life; and his name and title were Cover Thyself! With him, helping him, was the reflexive Save Thyself! and against these—Robin, whom she loved (but love is what she felt, once, for a canary, and once for a Raggedy Ann doll) and her sense of duty to Sue Martin (but so lightly promised, and at the time such a meaningless formality). There could be no choice in such a battle, though she must live with the consequences for all

her years.

Then—

—it was as if a mighty voice had called *Stop!* and the very flames froze. Half a foot above her hung the jagged end of the burning beam, and chunks of plaster, splinters and scraps of shattered lath and glowing joist stopped in midair. Yet during this sliver of a fraction of time, she knew that the phenomenon was a mental something, a figment, and the idea of time-cessation only a clumsy effort of her mind's to account for what was happening.

Save Thyself was still there, hysterical hands clutching for the controls, but *Cover Thyself* disappeared into the background. Save herself she would, but it would be on new terms. She was in the grip of a reflex of reflexes, one which took into consideration all the factors a normal reflex would, to the end goal of survival. But along with these, it called up everything Reta Schmidt had ever done, everything she had been. In a single soundless flash, a new kind of light was thrown into every crevice and cranny of her existence. It was her total self now, reacting to a total situation far wider than that which obtained here in this burning room. It illuminated even the future—that much of it which depended upon these events, between them and the next probable major “crossroads.” It canceled past misjudgments and illogics and replaced them with rightness, even for the times she had known what was right and had done otherwise. It came and was gone even while she leaped, while she took two bounding steps across the floor and the beam crashed and crushed and showered sparks where she had been standing.

She scooped up the child and ran down the hall, through the foyer, into the kitchen. It was dark there, thick with swirling smoke, but the glass panels on the kitchen door glared with some unfamiliar light from outdoors. She began to cough violently, but grimly aimed at the light and drove ahead. It was eclipsed suddenly by a monstrous shadow, and suddenly it exploded inward. There were lights out there she had never seen before, and half-silhouetted in the broken doorway was a big man with a gleaming helmet and an axe. She tried to call, or perhaps it was only a scream, but instead she went into a spasm of coughing.

“Somebody in here?” asked the man. A beam of light, apparently from the street, lit up the shield on the front of his helmet as he leaned forward. He stepped inside. “Whew! Where

are you?"

She went blindly to him and pushed Robin against his coat. "The baby," she croaked. "Get him out of this smoke."

He grunted and suddenly Robin was gone from her arms. "You all right?" He was peering into the black and the smoke.

"Take him out," she said. "Then I'll want your coat."

He went out. Miss Schmidt could hear Robin's clear voice: "You a fireman?"

"I sure am," rumbled the man. "Want to see my fire engine? Then sit right there on the grass and wait one second. Okay?"

"Okay."

The coat flew through the doorway.

"Got it?"

"Thank you." She put the huge garment on and went out. The fireman waited there, again holding Robin in his arms. "You all right, ma'am?"

Her lungs were an agony and she had burns on her feet and shoulders. Her hair was singed and one of her hands was flayed across its back. "I'm just fine," she said.

They began to walk up the road. Robin squirmed around in the man's arms and popped his head out to look back at the brightly burning house.

"'Bye, Boff," he said happily, and then gave his heart to the fire engine.

XII

"Mother, the bread's burning!"

Mary Haunt opened her eyes to an impossible glare and a great roaring. She shrieked and flailed out blindly, as if she could frighten it away, whatever it was; and then she came enough to her senses to realize that she still sat in her chair by the window, and that the house was on fire. She leaped to her feet, sending the heavy chair skittering across the room where it toppled over against the clothespress. As it always did when it was bumped, the clothespress calmly opened its doors.

But Mary Haunt didn't wait for that or anything else. She struck the screen with the flat of her hand. It popped out easily, and she hit the ground almost at the same time it did. She ran off a few steps, and then, like Lot's wife, curiosity overtook her and

she stopped. She turned around in fascination.

Great wavering flames leapt fifty and sixty feet in the air and all the windows were alight. From the town side she could hear the shriek and clang of fire engines, and the windows and doors opening, and running feet. But the biggest sound of all was the roar of the fire, like a giant's blowtorch.

She looked back at her own window. She could see into the room easily, the chair on its side, the bed with its chenille top-spread sprouting measles of spark and char, and the gaping doors of the—"My clothes! My clothes!"

Furiously she ran back to the window, paused a moment in horror to see fire run along the picture-molding of the inside wall like a nightmare caterpillar. "My clothes," she whispered. She didn't make much money at her job, but every cent that wasn't used in bed and board went on her back. She mouthed something, and from her throat came that animal growl of hers; she put both hands on the sill and leaped, and tumbled back into the house.

She was prepared for the heat but not for that intensity of light, and the noise was worst of all. She recoiled from it and stood for a moment with her hands over her eyes, swaying with the impact of it. Then she ground her teeth and made her way across to the clothespress. She swept open the bottom drawer and turned out the neatly folded clothes. Down at the bottom was a cotton print dress, wrapped around a picture frame. She lifted it out and hugged it, and ran across to the window with it. She leaned far out and dropped it gently on the grass, then turned back in again.

The far wall, by the door, began to buckle high up, and suddenly there was fire up there. The corner near the ceiling toppled into the room with a crash and a cloud of white dust and greasy-looking smoke, and then the whole wall fell, not toward her, but away, so that her room now included a section of the corridor outside. As the dust settled somebody, a man, came roaring inarticulately and battering through the rubble. She could not know who it was. He apparently meant to travel the corridor whether it was all there or not, and he did, disappearing again into the inferno.

She staggered back toward the clothespress. She felt mad, drunk, crazy. Maybe it was the de-oxygenated atmosphere and maybe it was fear and reaction, but it was sort of wonderful, too;

she felt her face writhing and part of her was numb with astonishment at what the rest of her was doing; she was laughing. She slammed into the clothespress, gasping for breath, filled her lungs and delivered up a shrill peal of laughter. Almost helpless from it, she fumbled down a dull satin evening gown with a long silver sash. She held it up in front of her and laughed again, doubling over it, and then straightened up, rolling the dress up into a ball as she did so. With all her might she hurled it into the rubble of the hallway. Next was a simple black dress with no back and a little bolero; with an expression on her face that can only be described as cheerful, she threw it after the evening gown. Then the blue, and the organdy with the taffeta underskirt, and the black and orange one she used to call her Hallowe'en dress; each one she dragged out, held up, and hurled: "You," she growled between her convulsions of laughter, "you, and you, and you." When the press was empty, she ran to the bureau and snatched open her scarf drawer, uncovering a flowerbed of dainty, filmy silk and nylon and satin shawls, scarves, and kerchiefs. She whipped out an over-sized babushka, barely heavier than the air that floated it, and ran with it to the flaming mass where her door once was. She dipped and turned like a dancer, fluttering it through flame, and when it was burning she bounced back to the bureau and put it in the drawer with the others. Fire streamed out of the drawer and she laughed and laughed....

And something nipped her sharply on the calves; she yelped and turned and found the lace of her black negligee was on fire. She twisted back and gathered the cloth and ripped it away. The pain had sobered her and she was bewildered now, weak and beginning to be frightened. She started for the window and tripped and fell heavily, and when she got up the smoke was suddenly like a scalding blanket over her head and shoulders and she didn't know which way to go. She knelt and peered and found the window in an unexpected direction, and made for it. As she tumbled through, the ceiling behind her fell, and the roof after it.

On her belly she clawed away from the house, sobbing, and at last rose to her knees. She smelt of smoke and burned hair and all her lovely fingernails were broken. She squatted on the ground, staring at the flaming shell of the house, and cried like a little

girl. But when her swollen eyes rested on that square patch in the grass, she stopped crying and got up and limped over to it. Her cotton print, and the picture ... she picked the tidy package up and went tiredly away with it into the shadows where the hedge met the garage.

XIII

O'Banion raised his head groggily from the fly-leaf of his *Blackstone* and the neat inscription written there:

*The law doth punish man or woman
That steals the goose from off the common,
But let the greater felon loose,
That steals the common from the goose.*

—a piece of eighteenth-century japery which O'Banion deplored. However, it had been written there by Opdycke when he was in law school, and the Opdyckes were a darn fine family. Princeton people, of course, but nobody minded.

All this flickered through his mind as he swam up out of sleep, along with "What's the matter with my head?" because any roaring that loud must be in his ears; it would be too incredible anywhere else, and "What's the matter with the light?"

Then he was fully awake, and on his feet. "My God!"

He ran to the door and snatched it open. Flame squirted at him as if from a hose; in a split second he felt his eyebrows disappear. He yelled and staggered back from it, and it pursued him. He turned and dove out the window, landing clumsily on his stomach with his fists clenched over his solar plexus. His own weight drove the fists deep, and for a full minute he lay groaning for air. At last he got up, shook himself, and pelted around the house to the front. One fire engine was already standing by the curb. There was a police car and the knot of bug-eyed spectators who spring apparently out of the ground at the scene of any accident anywhere at any hour. At the far end of the Bittelman lot, there was a sharp scream of rubber and a glare of lights as a taxicab pulled in as close to the police barrier as it could get. The door was already open; a figure left it, half running, half thrown out by the sudden stop.

"Sue!" But no one heard him—everyone else was yelling too:

“Look!” “Somebody stop her!” “Hey!” “Hey, you!”

O’Banion backed off a little to cup his hands and yell again, when directly over his head a cheerful small voice said, “Mommy runs fast!”

“Robin! You’re all right—” He was perched on top of the fire engine with one arm around the shining brass bell, looking like a Botticelli seraph. Someone beside him—good heavens, it was Miss Schmidt, disheveled and bright-eyed, wrapped up in some tentlike garment—Miss Schmidt screamed, “Stop her, stop her, I’ve got the baby here!”

Robin said to Miss Schmidt, “Tonio runs fast too, shall we?”

Now they were all yelling at O’Banion, but in four paces he could hear nothing but the roar ahead of him. He had never seen a house burn like this, all over, all at once. He took the porch steps in one bound and had just time to turn his shoulder to the door. It was ajar, but couldn’t swing fast enough under such an impact. It went down flat and slid, and for one crazy moment O’Banion was riding it like an aquaplane in a sea of fire, for the foyer floor was ablaze. Then the leading edge of the door caught on something and spilled him off. He rolled over twice in fuming debris and then got his feet under him. It was like a particularly bad dream, so familiar, so confusing. He turned completely around to orient himself, found the corridor, and started up it, yelling for Sue at the top of his voice. He saw a left-hand wall lean down toward him and had to scamper back out of the way. It had barely poured its rubble down when he was on, in, and through it. Over the crash and roar, over his own hoarse bellowing, he thought he heard a crazy woman laughing somewhere in the fire. Even in his near-hysteria, he could say, “Not Sue, that’s not Sue Martin....” And he was, before he knew it, at and past Sue Martin’s room. He flung out a hand. He bounced off the end wall and turned as he did so, like a sprint swimmer, and swung into Sue Martin’s room. “Sue! Sue!”

Was he mistaken? Did someone call, “Robin—Robin honey ...”?

He dropped to his knees, where he could see in relatively clearer air. “Sue, oh Sue!”

She lay half buried in rubble from the fallen ceiling. He threw off scorched and broken two-by-fours and burning lath, took her by the shoulders and lifted her out of the heap of broken plaster —thank the powers for that! it had protected her to some degree.

"Sue?"

"Robin," she croaked.

He shook her. "He's all right, he's outside, I saw him."

She opened her eyes and frowned at him. Not at him; at what he had said. "He's here somewhere."

"I saw him. Come on!" He lifted her to her feet, and as she dragged, "It's the truth; do you think *I* would lie to you?"

He felt strength surge into her body. "You forgot to say, 'I, an O'Banion,'" she said, but it didn't hurt. They stumbled to the window and he pushed her through it and leaped after her. For two painful breaths they lay gulping clean air, and then O'Banion got to his feet. His head was spinning and he almost lay down again. He set his jaw and helped Sue Martin up. "Too close!" he shouted. Holding her up, he half-dragged her no more than a step when she suddenly straightened, and with unexpected and irresistible strength leapt back toward the burning wall, pulling him with her. He caught at her to regain his balance, and she put her arms tight around him. "The wall!" he screamed, as it leaned out over them. She said nothing, but her arms tightened even more, and he could have moved more easily if he had been bound to a post with steel chains. The wall came down then, thunder and sparks, like the end of the world; madly, it occurred to him just then that he could solve one of his problem cases by defining the unorthodox contract under suit as a stock certificate.

But instead of dying he took a stinging blow on his right shoulder, and that was all. He opened his eyes. He and Sue Martin still stood locked together, and all around them was flame like a flowerbed with the rough outline of the house wall and its peaked roof. Around their feet was the four-foot circular frame of the attic vent, which had ringed them like a quoit.

The woman slumped in his arms, and he lifted her and picked his way, staggering, into the friendly dark and the welcome hands of the firemen. But when they tried to lift her away from him she held his arm and would not let go. "Put me down, just put me down," she said. "I'm all right. Put me down."

They did and she leaned against O'Banion. He said, "We're okay now. We'll go up to the road. Don't mind about us." The firemen hesitated, but when they began to walk, they were apparently reassured, and ran back to their work. Hopeless work, O'Banion amended. But for a few sagging studs and the two

chimneys, the house was little more than a pit of flames.

"Is Robin really—"

"Shh. He's really. Miss Schmidt got him out, I think. Anyway, he's sitting on the fire engine enjoying every minute. He watched you going in. He approves of your speed."

"You—"

"I saw you too. I yelled."

"And then you came after me." They walked a slow pace or so.

"Why?"

Robin was safe, of course, he was about to say, so you didn't have to—and then there was within him a soundless white flash that lit up all he had ever done and been, everything he had read, people and places and ideas. Where he had acted right, he felt the right proven; where he had been wrong, he could see now the right in full force, even when for years he had justified his wrong. He saw fully now what old Sam Bittelman had almost convinced him of intellectually with his searching questions. He had fought away Sam's suggestion that there was something ludicrous, contradictory about the law and its pretensions to permanence. Now he saw that the law, as he knew it, was not under attack at all. As long as a man treated the body of law like a great stone buttress, based in bedrock and propping up civilization, he was fortifying a dead thing which could only kill the thing it was built to uphold. But if he saw civilization as an intricate, *moving entity*, the function of law changed. It was governor, stabilizer, inhibitor, *control* of something dynamic and progressive, subject to the punishments and privileges of evolution like a living thing. His whole idea of the hair-splitting search for "precedent" as a refining process in law was wrong. It was an adaptive process instead. The suggestion that not one single law is common to all human cultures, past and present, was suddenly no insult to law at all, but a living compliment; to nail a culture to permanent laws now seemed as ridiculous a concept as man conventionally refusing to shed his scales and his gills.

And with this revelation of the viability of man and his works, O'Banion experienced a profound realignment in his (or was it really his) attitude toward himself, his effortful preoccupation to defend and justify his blood and breeding and his gentleman's place in the world. It came to him now that although the law may say here that men *are* born equal, and there that they must

receive equal treatment before the law, no one but a complete fool would insist that men are equal. Men, wherever they come from, whatever they claim for themselves, are only what's in their heads and what's in their hearts. The purest royal blood that yields a weak king will yield a failure; a strong peasant can rise higher and accomplish more, and if what he accomplishes is compatible with human good, he is surely no worse than a beneficent king. Over and above anything else, however, shone the fact that a good man needs least of all to prove it by claiming that he comes from a line of good men. And for him to assume the privileges and postures of the landed gentry after the land is gone is pure buffoonery. Time enough for sharp vertical differentiations between men when the differences become so great that the highest may not cross-breed with the lowest; until then, in the broad view, differences are so subtle as to be negligible, and the concept "to marry out of one's class" belongs with the genesis of hippocrits and gryphons—in mythology.

All this, and a thousand times more, unfolded and was clear to O'Banion in this illuminated instant, so short it took virtually no time at all, so bright it lit up all the days of his past and part of his future as well. And it had happened between pace and pace, when Sue Martin said, "You followed me. Why?"

"I love you," he said instantly.

"Why?" she whispered.

He laughed joyously. "It doesn't matter."

Sue Martin—*Sue Martin!* —began to cry.

XIV

Phil Halvorsen opened his eyes and saw that the house was on fire. He lay still, watching the flames feed, and thought, isn't this what I was waiting for?

Now there can be an end to it, he thought peacefully. Now I never need worry again that I'm wrong to be as I am, and other people's needs, the appetites and rituals of the great Average will no longer accuse me. I cannot be excluded unless I exist, so here's an end to being excluded. I cannot be looked down on when I can no longer be seen.

The ceiling began to develop a tan patch, and hot white powder fell from it to his face. He covered it with the pillow. He

was resigned to later, final agonies because they would be final, but he saw no reason to put up with the preliminaries. Just then most of the plaster came down on him. It didn't hurt much, and it meant the thing would be over sooner than he thought.

He heard faintly, over the colossal roaring, a woman scream. He lay still. As much as anyone—perhaps more—he would ordinarily be concerned about the others. But not now. Not now. Such concern is for a man who expects to live with a conscience afterward.

Something—it sounded like an inside wall—went down very near. It jolted the foot of his bed and he felt its hot exhalation and the taste of its soot, but otherwise it did not reach him. "So come on," he said tightly, "get it over with, will you?" and hurled the pillow away.

As if in direct and obedient answer the ceiling over him opened up—*up*; apparently a beam had broken and was tipping down into an adjoining room, upward here. Then the tangle of stringers it carried fell away and started down. High above was blackness, suddenly rent by smoky orange light—the inside of the roof, a section of which was falling in with the stringers.

"All right," said Halvorsen, as if someone had asked him a question. He closed his eyes.

He closed his eyes on a flash of something like an inner and unearthly light, and time stood still ... or perhaps it was only that subjectively he had all the time in the world to examine this shadowless internal cosmos.

Most immediately, it laid out before him the sequence of events which had brought him here, awaiting death on a burning bed. In this sequence a single term smote him with that "well, of course!" revelation that rewarded his plodding, directive thoughts when they were successful for him. The term was "Average," and his revelation came like a burst of laughter: for anyone else this would have been a truism, an inarguable axiom; like a fool he had let his convoluted thinking breeze past "Average," use "Average," worry about "Average" without ever looking at it.

But "Average"—Average Appetite—was here for him to see, a line drawn from side to side on a huge graph. And all over the graph were spots—millions of them. (He was in a place where he could actually see and comprehend "millions.") On that line lived this creation, this demigod, to whom he had felt subservient for

so long, whose hungers and whose sense of fitness ought to have been—*had* been—Halvorsen's bench-mark, his reference point. Halvorsen had always felt himself a member of a minority—a minority which shrank as he examined it, and he was always examining it. All the world catered to Average Man and his “normal” urges, and this must be proper, for he was aware of the reciprocities: Average Man got these things because these things were what Average Man wanted and needed.

Want and need ... and there was the extraordinary discovery he had made when Bitty asked him: if people really needed it, would there have to be so much high-pressure salesmanship?

This he threw on the graph like a transparent overlay; it too bore a line from side to side, but much lower down, indicating with much more accuracy just how interested Average Man was in the specific appetite about which he made so much noise. Now bend close and look at those millions of spots—individual people all, each with his true need for the kind of cultural pressure which was driving a man, here, to his death from guilt.

The first thing Halvorsen saw was that the dots were scattered so widely that the actual number falling on the line Average Man was negligible: there were countless millions more unaverage people. It came to him that those who obey the gospel of Average Man are, in their efforts to be like the mass of humanity, obeying the dictates of one of the smallest minorities of all. The next thing to strike him was that it took the presence of *all* these dots to place that line just where it was; there was no question of better, or worse, or more or less fit. Except for the few down here and their opposite numbers up there, the handful of sick, insane, incomplete, or distorted individuals whose sexual appetites were nonexistent or extreme, the vast majority above and below the true average were basically “normal.” And here where he, Halvorsen might appear on the graph—he had plenty of company.

He'd never known that! The magazine covers, the advertisements, the dirty jokes—they hadn't let him know it.

He understood now, the mechanism of this cultural preoccupation; it came to him in the recollection that he had appeared at work for three hundred consecutive working days and nobody noticed his ears. And then one day a sebaceous cyst in his left lobe had become infected, and the doctor removed it

and he showed up at work with a bandage covering his ear. *Everybody began to think about Halvorsen's ear!* Every interview had to begin with an explanation of his ear or the applicant would keep straying his attention to it. And he'd noticed, too, that after he explained about the cyst, the interviewee would always glance at Halvorsen's other ear before he got back to business. Now, in this silver place where all interrelationships were true ones, he could equate his covered and noticeable ear with a Bikini bathing suit, and see clearly how normal interest-disinterest—acceptance—can be put under forced draft.

It came to him also *why* this particular cultural matrix did this to itself. In its large subconscious, it probably knew quite clearly the true status of its sensual appetites. It must reason, then, that unless it kept these appetites whipped up to a froth at all times, it might not increase itself, and it felt it must increase. This was not a pretty thought, but neither is the pounce of a cat on a baby bird; yet one cannot argue with the drive behind it.

So it was that Halvorsen's reasons for not living ceased to be reasons; with the purest of truth he could say I am not unmanned; I am not unfit; I am not abnormal.... I am not alone.

All this in no-time, as he closed his eyes to await the mass even now falling on him. And the reflex of reflexes acted just as eyelids met; he spun off the bed, bounced out of the nearby window, and was on the grass outside as the ceiling and walls together met the floor in a gout of flame.

XV

The girl climbed up to the front seat of the fire engine. "Move over."

Miss Schmidt swung her worried gaze away from the burning house, and said in a preoccupied tone, "I don't think you'd be allowed to, little girl. We're from that hou— Why, it's Mary Haunt!"

"Didn't recognize me, huh?" said Mary Haunt. She swung a hip and shunted Miss Schmidt over. "Can't say I blame you. What a mess!" she said, indicating the house.

"Mr. O'Banion is in there; he went after Mrs. Martin. And have you seen Mr. Halvorsen?"

"No."

“Tonio! Tonio!” Robin suddenly cried.

“Shh, dear. He’ll be along.”

“Dare he *iss!* Dare he *iss!* Momee!” he shrieked, “Come see my fire engine, shall we?”

“Oh, thank God, thank God they’re safe,” said Miss Schmidt. She hugged Robin until he grunted.

“I’m all choked up,” growled Mary Haunt. Again she made the angry gesture at the house. “*What a mess.* Everything I own—the war-paint, the clothes, all my magazines—everything, gone. You know what that means. I—”

I’ve got to go home now. And it was here, on the slightest matter of phrasing that the strange flash of silver suffused Mary Haunt; not under the descending scythe of Death, nor under the impact of soul found, heart found: just for the nudge of a word, she had her timeless instant.

All her life and the meaning of her life and all the things in it: the dimity curtains and home-baked bread, Jackie and Seth whamming away at each other for the privilege of carrying her books, the spice-shelf and the daffodils under the parlor windows. She’d loved it so, and reigned over it; and mostly, she’d been a gentle princess and ruled kindly.

Did they throw you out, gal?

She’d never known where it started, how it came about, until now. Now, with astonishment, she did. Daddy started it, before she was old enough to walk, Daddy one of the millions who had applauded a child actress called Shirley Temple, one of the thousands who had idolized her, one of the hundreds who had deified her. “Little Mary Hollywood,” he’d called his daughter, and it had been “When you’re in pictures, honey—” Every morning was a fountain to empty the reservoir of his dreams; every night he filled again from the depthless well of his ambition for her.

And everyone believed him. Mom came to believe him, and her kid brother, and finally everyone in town. They had to; Daddy’s unswerving, undoubting conviction overrode any alternatives, and she herself clinched it, just by being what she was, an exquisite child exquisitely groomed, who grew more beautiful (by Hollywood standards) every year. She wanted what every child wants: loving attention. She got it in fullest measure. She wanted to do what every child wants to do: gain the approval of her

elders. She tried; and indeed, no other course was open to her.

Did they throw you out, gal?

Perhaps Daddy might have outgrown it; or if not, perhaps he'd have known, or found out, how to accomplish his dream in a real world. But Daddy died when she was six, and Mom took over his dream as if it had been a flower from his dead hand. She did not nourish it; she pressed it between the leaves of her treasured memories of him. It was a live thing, true, but arrested at the intensity and the formlessness of his hopes for her when she was six. She encouraged the child only to want to be in pictures, and to be sure she would be; it never occurred to her that there might be things for the child to learn. Her career was coming; it was coming like Christmas.

But no one knew when.

And when she cleaned house, they all thought it was sweet, so pretty to watch, but they'd rather take the broom away from her; and when she baked, it was pretty too but not what she was really *for*; and when she read the diet sections in the grocery magazines, that was all right, but the other features—how to make tangerine gravy for duck, how to remove spots from synthetic fibers—"Why, Mary! you'll have a little army worrying about those things for you!"

Movie magazines then, and movies, and waiting, until the day she left.

Did they throw you out, gal?

Screen Society had a feature on Hollywood High School, and it mentioned how many stars and starlets had come from there, and the ages some of them had been when they signed contracts. And suddenly she wasn't the Shirley Temple girl at all, she was older, years older than two girls in the article, the same age as five of them. Yet here she was still, while the whole town waited ... suppose she never made it? Suppose nothing happened here? And she began to interpret this remark, that look, the other silence, in ways that troubled her, until she wanted to hide, or to drop dead, or leave.

Just like that, leaving was the answer. She told no one, she took what clothes she had that were good, she bought a ticket for just anywhere and wrote thrilling, imaginative, untrue letters at wider and wider intervals. Naively she got a job which might mean her Big Break and which actually never would. And at last

she reached a point where she would not look back, for wanting home so much; she would not look forward, for knowing there was nothing there; she held herself in a present of futility and purposive refusal to further the ambition she insisted she had; and she had no pleasure and no outlet but anger. She took refuge in her furies; she scorned people and what they did and what they wanted, and told them all so. And she took the picture of Mom standing in front of the house in the spring, with the jonquils all about and the tulips coming, and she wrapped it up in the cotton print Mom had made for her fourteenth birthday and never given her because *Screen Society* had said princess-style for teenagers was corny.

Did they throw you out, gal?

Old Sam had asked her that; he knew, even when she didn't. But now, in this strange silver moment, she knew; she knew it all. Yes, they had thrown her out. They had let her be a dead man's dream until she was nearly dead herself. They never let her be Mary Haunt who wanted to fix the new curtains or bake a berry pie, and have a square hedge along the Elm Street side and go to meeting on Sundays. They had marked her destiny on her face and body and on the clothes she wore, and stamped it into her speech and fixed her hair the way they wanted it, and to the bottom of her heart she was angry.

And now, all of a sudden, and for the very first time, it occurred to her that she could, if she wanted, be Mary Haunt her own self, and be it right there at home; that home was the best place to be that very good thing, and she could replace their disappointment with a very real pride. She could be home before the Strawberry Festival at the church; she would wear an apron and get suds on her forehead when she pushed her hair back, the way Bitty did sometimes.

So Mary Haunt sat on a fire engine, next to the high-school librarian who was enveloped in a tremendous raincoat, saying that everything was burned up, lost; and about to say, "I've got to go home now." But she said, "I can go home now." She looked into Miss Schmidt's eyes and smiled a smile the older woman had never seen before. "I can, I can! I can go home now!" Mary Haunt sang. Impulsively she took Miss Schmidt's hand and squeezed it. She looked into her face and laughed, "I'm not mad any more, not at you or anybody ... and I've been a little stinker and I'm

sorry; I'm going *home!*" And Miss Schmidt looked at the smudged face, the scorched hair drawn back into a childish ponytail and held by a rubber band, the spotless princess dress. "Why," said Miss Schmidt, "you're beautiful, just beautiful!" "I'm not. I'm seventeen, only seventeen," Mary Haunt said out of a wild happiness, "and I'm going home and bake a cake." And she hugged her mother's picture and smiled; even the ruined house did not glow quite this way.

EXCERPT FROM FIELD EXPEDITION [NOTEBOOK]: [! ! !]

Did it ever work! [You]’d think these specimens had used Synapse Beta sub Sixteen all their lives! If [we] had a [tenth] as much stamina [we] could [lie down] in a [bed] of paradoxes and go to [sleep].

[We] will observe for a [short period] longer, and then pack up and leave. This is a [fascinating] place to visit, but [I] wouldn’t want to [live] here.

XVI

It was October, and possibly the last chance they’d have for a picnic, and the day agreed and was beautiful for them. They found a fine spot where a stand of birch grew on both sides of an old split-rail fence, and a brook went by just out of sight. After they were finished O’Banion lay on his stomach in the sun, and thoughtfully scratched his upper lip with a bit of straw.

His wife laughed softly.

"Hm?"

"You’re thinking about the Bittelmans again."

"How’d you know?"

"Just used to it. When you go off into yourself and look astonished and mystified and annoyed all at once, it’s the Bittelmans again."

"Harmless hobby," said Halvorsen, and smiled.

"Is it, Phil? Tonio, how would you like me to go all pouty and coy and complain that you’ve spent more time thinking about them than about me?"

"Do by all means go all pouty and coy. I’ll divorce you."

"Tony!"

"Well," he said lazily, "I had so much fun marrying you in the

first place that it might be worth doing again. Where's Robin?"

"Right h— Oh, dear, *Robin!*"

Down in the cleft, where the brook gurgled, Robin's voice answered instantly. "Frogs here, Mommy. Deelicious!"

"Does he eat 'em raw?" asked Halvorsen mildly.

Sue laughed. "That just means 'pretty' or 'desirable' or even 'bright green.' Robin, don't you dare get wet, you promise me?"

"I promise me," said the voice.

"And don't go away!"

"I don't."

"Why don't they show up?" demanded O'Banion. "Just once, that's all I'd ever want. Just show their faces and answer two questions."

"Why don't who—oh, Sam and Bitty. What two questions?"

"What they did to us, how and why."

"That's one question, counselor?" asked Halvorsen.

"Yes. Two: What they are."

"Now, why'd you say 'what' instead of 'who?'"

"It comes to that." He rolled over and sat up. "Honey, would you mind if I ran down everything we've found out so far, just once more?"

"Summarize and rest your case?"

"I don't know about resting it ... reviewing the brief."

"I often wonder why you call it a brief," Halvorsen chuckled.

O'Banion rose and went to the fence. Putting one hand on a slender birch trunk, he hopped upward, turning, to come to rest sitting on the top rail. "Well, one thing I'm sure of: Sam and Bitty could *do* things to people, and they did it to all of us. And I refuse to believe that they did it with logic and persuasion."

"They could be pretty persuasive."

"It was more than that," O'Banion said impatiently. "What they did to me changed everything about me."

"How very intriguing."

"Everything about the way I *think*, hussy. I can look back on that now and realize that I was roped, thrown, and notched. When he wanted me to answer questions I had to answer them, no matter what I was thinking. When he was through with me he turned me loose and made me go back to my business as if nothing had happened. Miss Schmidt told me the same thing." He shifted his weight on the rail and said excitedly, "Now there's our

prize exhibit. All of us were—changed—by this thing, but Reta—she's a *really* different person."

"She wasn't more changed than the others," said Sue soberly. "She's thirty-eight years old. It's an interesting age because when you're there and look five years older, and then spruce up the way she did and look five years younger, it looked like twenty years' difference, not ten. That's all cosmetics and clothes, though. The real difference is as quiet and deep as—well, Phil here."

Again Halvorsen found a smile. "Perhaps you're right. She shifted from library to teaching. It was a shift from surrounding herself with other people's knowledge to surrounding other people with hers. She's alive."

"I'll say. Boyfriend too."

"Quiet and deep," said O'Banion thoughtfully, swinging his feet. "That's right. All you get out of Halvorsen when you ask him about it is a smile like a light going on and, 'Now it's right for me to be me.'

"That's it—all of it," chuckled Halvorsen happily.

"And Mary Haunt, bless her. Second happiest child I ever saw. *Robin! Are you all right?*"

"Yis!" came the voice.

"I'm still not satisfied," said O'Banion. "I have the feeling we're staring at very petty and incidental results of some very important cause. In a moment of acute stress I made a decision which affected my whole life."

"Our."

He blew her a kiss. "Reta Schmidt says the same thing, though she wouldn't go into detail. And maybe that's what Halvorsen means when he says, 'Now, it's right for me ...' You annoy me."

"Sir!" she cried with mock horror.

He laughed. "You know what I mean. Only you got exposed to the Bittelmanns and didn't change. Everybody else got wonderful," he smiled, "You just stayed wonderful. Now what's so special about you?"

"Must we sit here and be—"

"Shush. Think back. Was there any *different* kind of thing that happened to you that night, some kind of emergency thinking you did that was above and beyond anything you thought you could do?"

“Not that I remember.”

Suddenly he brought his fist down on his thigh. “There *was!* Remember right after we got out of the house, the wall fell on us? You dragged me back and held me still and that attic vent dropped right around us?”

“That. Yes, I remember. But it wasn’t special. It just made sense.”

“Sense? I’d like to put a computer on that job—after scorching it half through and kicking it around a while. Somehow you calculated how fast that thing was falling and how much ground it would cover when it hit. You computed that against our speed outward. You located the attic vent opening and figured where it would land, and whether or not it could contain us both. Then you estimated our speed *if* we went toward the safe spot and concluded that we could make it. *Then* you went into action, more or less over my dead body to boot. All that in—” He closed his eyes to relive the moment. “—all of one and a half seconds absolute tops. It wasn’t *special?*”

“No, it wasn’t,” she said positively. “It was an emergency, don’t you see? A real emergency, not only because we might get hurt, but in terms of all we were to each other and all we could be if only you—”

“Well, I did,” he smiled. “But I still don’t understand you. You mean you think more, not less—widen your scope instead of narrowing your focus when it’s that kind of emergency? You can think of all those things at once, better and faster and more accurately?”

Halvorsen suddenly lunged and caught O’Banion’s foot, pulling it sharply upward. He shouted “*Yoop!*” His right hand whipped up and back and scrabbled at the tree-trunk; his torso twisted and his left hand shot straight down. His legs flailed and straightened; for a moment he see-sawed on the rail on his kidneys. At last he got his left hand on the rail and pulled himself upward to sit again. “Hey! What do you think you’re—”

“Proving a point,” said Halvorsen. “Look, Tony: without warning you were thrown off balance. What did you do? You reached out for that tree-trunk without looking—got it, too; you knew just how fast and how far to go. But at the same time you put your left hand straight down, ready to catch your weight if you went down to the ground. Meantime you banged around with

your legs and shifted your weight this way just enough to make a new balance on top. Now tell me: did you sit there after I pushed you and figure all those things out, one by one?"

"By golly no. Snop—snap—synapses."

"What?"

"Synapses. Sort of pathways in the brain that get paved better and better as you do something over and over. After a while they happen without conscious thought. Keeping your balance is that kind of thing, on the motor level. But don't tell me you have a sort of ... personal-cultural inner ear-something that makes you reach reflexively in terms of your past and your future and ... but that's what happened to me that night!" He stared at Halvorsen. "You figured that out long ago, you and your IBM head!"

"It always happens if the emergency's a bad one," Sue said composedly. "Sometimes when you don't even know it is an emergency. But what's remarkable? Aren't drowning men supposed to see their whole lives pass before them?"

"Did you say that always happens with your emergencies?"

"Well, doesn't it?"

Suddenly he began to chuckle softly, and at her questioning look he said, "You remind me of something a psychologist told me once. A man was asked to describe his exact sensations on getting drunk. 'Just like anybody else,' he says. 'Well, describe it,' says the doctor. The man says, 'Well, first your face gets a little flushed and your tongue gets thick, and after a while your ears begin to wiggle—' Sue, honey, I've got news for you. Maybe you react like that in important moments, a great big shiny flash of truth and proportional relationships, but believe me, other people don't. I never did until that night. *That's it!*" he yelled at the top of his voice.

From down the slope came a clear little voice, "Wash 'at noice?"

Sue and Halvorsen smiled at one another and then O'Banion said earnestly, "That's what Bitty and Sam gave us—a synaptic reflex like the equilibrium mechanisms, but bigger—much bigger. A human being is an element in a whole culture, and the culture itself is alive.... I suppose the species could be called, as a whole, a living thing. And when we found ourselves in a stress situation which was going to affect us signally—dangerously, or just importantly—we reacted to it in the way I did just now when you

pushed me—only on a cultural level. It's as if Sam and Bitty had found a way to install or develop that 'balancing' mechanism in us. It resolved some deep personal conflict of Halvorsen's; it snapped Mary out of a dangerous delusion and Miss Schmidt out of a dangerous retreat. And, well, you know about me."

"I can't believe people don't think that way in emergencies!" she said, dazed.

"Maybe some do," said Halvorsen. "Come to think of it, people do some remarkable things under sudden stress; they make not-obvious but very right choices under pressure, like the man who cracks a joke and averts a panic or the boy who throws himself on a grenade to save his squad. They've surveyed themselves in terms of all they are and measured that against their surroundings and all it is—all in a split fraction of a second. I guess everyone has it. Some of it."

"Whatever this synapse is, the Bittelmans gave it to us ... yes, and maybe set the house on fire too.... Why? Testing? Testing what—just us, or human beings? *What are they?*" demanded the lawyer.

"Gone, that's what," said Halvorsen.

For a very brief time, he was wrong to say that.

EXCERPT FROM FIELD EXPEDITION [NOTEBOOK]: [Our] last [hour] here, so [we] [induced] three of the test specimens to [locus B] for final informal observation. [Smith] pretends to a certain [chagrin]. After all, [he] [says] all [we] did was to come [sizable abstract number] of [terrestrially immeasurable distance unit]s, forgoing absolutely the company of [our] [] and the pleasures of the []; strain [our] ingenuity and our [technical equipment] to the [break]ing point, even getting trapped into using that [miserable impractical] power supply and [charge]ing it up every [month]—all to detect and analyze the incidence of Synapse Beta sub Sixteen. And here these specimens sit, locating and defining the Synapse during a brief and idle conversation! Actually, [I] [think] [Smith] is [pleased] with them for it. We shall now [dismantle] the [widget] and the [wadget] and [take off].

Robin was watching a trout.

“Tsst! Tsst!”

He was watching more than the trout, really; he was watching its shadow. It had occurred to him that perhaps the shadow wasn’t a shadow, but another and fuzzier kind of fish which wouldn’t let the more clear-cut one get away from over it, so maybe that was why the trout kept hanging into the current, hanging and *zoom!* darting forward. But he never was fast enough for the fuzzy one, which stayed directly under him no matter what.

“Tsst! Robin!”

He looked up, and the trout was forgotten. He filled his powerful young lungs with air and his face with joy, and then made a heroic effort and stifled his noisy delight in obedience to that familiar finger-on-lips and its explosive “*Shh!*”

Barely able to contain himself, he splashed straight across the brook, shoes and all, and threw himself into Bitty’s arms. “Ah Robin!” said the woman, “wicked little boy. Are you a wicked little boy!”

“Yis. Bitty-bitty-BITTY!”

“Shh. Look who’s with me.” She put him down, and there stood old Sam. “Hey-y-y-y, boy?”

“Ah Sam!” Robin clasped his hands together and got them between his knees, bending almost double in delight. “Ware you been, Sam?”

“Around,” said Sam. “Listen, Robin, we came to say goodbye. We’re going away now.”

“Don’t go ‘way.”

“We have to,” said Bitty. She knelt and hugged him. “Goodbye, darling.”

“Shake,” said Sam gravely.

“Shake, rattle an’ roll,” said Robin with equal sobriety.

“Ready, Sam?”

“All set.”

Swiftly they took off their bodies, folded them neatly and put them in two small green plastic cases. On one was lettered [WIDGET] and on the other [WADGET], but of course Robin was too young to read. Besides, he had something else to astonish him. “Boff!” he cried. “Googie!”

Boff and Googie [waved] at him and he waved back. They picked up the plastic cases and threw them into a sort of bubble

that was somehow there, and [walked] in after them. Then they [went].

Robin turned away and without once looking back, climbed the slope and ran to Sue. He flung himself into her lap and uttered the long, whistle-like wail that preceded his rare bouts with bitter tears.

“Why *darling*, whatever happened? What is it? Did you bump your—”

He raised a flushed and contorted face to her. “Boff gone,” he said wetly. “Oh, oh-h-h, Boff an’ Googie gone.”

He cried most of the way home, and never mentioned Boff again.

INCIDENTAL [NOTES] ON FIELD REPORT: The discovery of total incidence and random use of Synapse Beta sub Sixteen in a species is unique in the known [cosmos]; yet introduction of the mass of data taken on the Field Expedition into the [master] [computer] alters its original [dictum] not at all: the presence of this Synapse in a species ensures its survival.

In the particular case at hand, the species undoubtedly bears, and will always bear, the [curse] of interpersonal and inter-cultural frictions, due to the amount of paradox possible. Where so many actions, decisions, and organizational activities can occur uncontrolled by the Synapse and its [universal-interrelational] modifying effect, paradox must result. On the other [hand], any species with such a concentration of the Synapse, even in partial use, will not destroy itself and very probably cannot be destroyed by anything.

Prognosis positive.

Their young are delightful. [I] [feel good]. [Smith], [I] [forgive] [you].

¹. TRANSLATOR’S NOTE: Despite the acknowledged fact that the translator is an expert on extraterrestrial language, culture, philosophy, and the theory and design of xenological devices, the reader’s indulgence is requested in this instance. To go into detail about these machines and the nature and modes of communication of the beings that operate them would be like writing the story of a young lover on the way to his reward, springing up his beloved’s front

steps, ringing the bell—and then stopping to present explicit detail about circuitous wiring and dry, dry cells. It is deemed more direct and more economical to use loose and convenient translations and to indicate them by brackets, in order to confine the narrative to the subject at hand. Besides, it pleases the translator's modesty to be so sparing with his [omniscience].

The Beholders

What I *meant* was that no more than one person in one or two hundred is worth a second thought, and that says it all. But why say it all in one sentence with the whole evening to kill and good drinks and comfortable surroundings? So I was saying to Bruno, "There is no such thing as a population explosion. We don't even have a population explosion. You know how many real people there are in the world? Maybe one in two hundred." You can kick this kind of tin-can along for an hour or more. And it really isn't my fault if I have a voice like a boat-horn and if at that moment Bruno had to go away and retread a couple of manhattans at the other end.

I mean, it isn't my *fault*.

Next thing I know this guy without glasses wants to touch my face. Ranges up alongside and excuses himself and says can he *touch* me! I looked him up and back and he was rumpled and he was worried and he was a little smaller than me, and his eyes were red and he would squinch them up and suck in his chin and move his head back on his neck every now and then which was why I thought he'd come out without his glasses. But one thing I didn't think he was, was queer. Then he called Bruno and bought one, and when Bruno went away he said, "Well, can I?" And I took up the full glass and said, "In this case, why not?" And he touched me. Quickly, forehead and cheeks, with both hands. "Thank God," he said. "Oh, thank God." And he drank his drink right down. "All right," I told him because I had nothing else to do and because this has been known to keep an anxious guy buying for hours and hardly noticing it, "What's your problem?"

His name was Millbourne and he was a physical biochemist and he used up two whole rounds of drinks telling me a lot of stuff that I don't remember and I wouldn't understand if I did. He said he'd been making some measurements with old-fashioned steel calipers and also with a newfangled radar thing, only I think he said it worked with light instead of radio waves. And the results didn't match. I mean, here he was measuring the human

body with tried-and-true methods and also with a new machine that had to be more accurate, and he was getting different results. But every now and then he would measure somebody, or a stiff, where the results matched up nice as you please. It was as if only one body in every two, three hundred was really what it seemed to be. Then he tried to explain about LSD and mescaline and that kind of hop, drugs that make you see more than you thought you could. What it all shook down to was, he had these three things on his mind, a pill, a set of like eyeglasses, and this girl.

Let me see if I can get it sorted out for you. He said if the world and everything in it was all the time getting larger and smaller, including all the scales and rulers and everything you used to measure with, why, you'd never know it. But maybe one day you find a ruler that stayed the same. Maybe you'd find something to measure with this ruler that also stayed the same. He said he got the idea that he himself was like a ruler that changed when everything else changed, so he couldn't measure right, and what he did, he took small doses of one of these drugs because, he said, it "expands the consciousness" —that is, it makes you see more than you thought you could see. Well, he saw more than he had, but not enough, so he made a contraption like eyeglasses to help them, using the kind of light the new measuring instrument was using, and that's when he found out that there isn't but one or two people in every three hundred that's real. I can't help how kooky that sounds, that's what the man said. If he took the pill and then looked at people through these like glasses, he could see which ones were real. And that isn't all. Without the glasses he could touch somebody and feel the difference, no matter what he saw. Go ahead, laugh. Just notice I'm not laughing.

All right, about the girl. This Millbourne worked at a big research laboratory connected to a hospital, and in the clinic one day he saw this girl bringing her mother in. The mother died right after and Millbourne kind of helped the girl through the bad time afterward, and, well, he got hung up on her. What I mean, if I tell you the Pacific is quite a little puddle, if I say Hood and Washington are fair-sized hills, it's the same kind of talk. Millbourne was *really* hung up. This girl—well, wait a bit.

So here's a guy who thinks he's discovered that only a fraction of the population is real, and the others—I asked him about the others, and he began to shake so much I all but ordered a drink

for him, but he quieted down some and asked me if I'd help him. I said help him do what?

He wanted me to look at his girl. Just to be sure, he wanted me to touch her. Imagine, touch her: he wanted me to put my hands on his girl.

Well I said sure. But then he told me I had to take this pill and also learn how to run the eyeglasses thing. I didn't much like that, especially the pill bit, but he was very persuasive, and about three more drinks along I was convinced. After all, all he wanted was for me to do something he couldn't bring himself to do, because he was so hung up on this girl: look at her through the gimmick to find out if she was real like him and me. I said throw away the pills and forget it, you couldn't tell otherwise, right? But no; he had to know for sure, but he just couldn't bring himself to do it. So okay, and we went to his place and he gave me the pills, three or four of them, and a paper telling me how to get in touch with him, and he checked me out on the eyeglasses gizmo. You had to have a battery pack and there were some controls to match up, and things look sort of hazy through them, but he said it worked all right. Then he said where to find the girl.

The next day I went there, a greeting-card shop it was, without my equipment, you understand, just to have a look and sort of figure the approach. And you know ...

You know, she, she—I am going to embarrass myself with you. I am no, well, poet is what I mean, but let me spit this out quick because it's in the way. You know there are girls that seem like they are sunlit, no matter what time or day or night you see them; like the sun is shining on them. I've seen a few like that in my life, two or three. But only once did I see a moonlit girl, and here she was, coming out of the card shop at quitting time. I didn't say anything, I let her go by, I would see her again when I had a chance to think, and I wasn't going to think about much else. The whole crazy story Millbourne told me turned into something different when I saw that girl come out of the shop. A guy is hot for some particular chick, well and good, it's maybe a matter of taste, maybe his and mine, maybe his and not mine, but ... this—

I did what I had to do. I mean, things like this are nobody's fault, is what I mean. I practiced around with the eyeglasses and

made some experiments, and finally one night I called Millbourne and made him meet me at the bar. He came in and I handed him a color photograph. He looked at it and quick at me; oh I hope to God I never see a man look at me like that again. I said to him why didn't he think of this? You hang one lens of the eyeglass gizmo over a Polaroid camera like a portrait attachment. The camera sees what it sees and takes no pills. He looked again at the picture and I thought I was going to have to hold him up. He closed his eyes for a long time and then he put the picture face up on the bar and we both looked at. What it showed was more or less human shaped, but nothing was ... nothing was finished. It was a base to put things on—here's where the hair will go, an eye goes here, here the mouth, and so on, but nobody had put anything on it.

Millbourne said, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." I didn't dig that. He said, "You and I, and a few others, we invent what we see, we put it there. We have eyes and hands and minds to do this work, I don't know why, and they all lie to us. Thank you," he says, standing up very straight, and he walks out the door and dives under the double duals of a semi-trailer; I saw him do it, I saw those big wide wheels spread him. I never had the chance to tell him that the picture was of Bruno the bartender. I never had the chance, really, to make up my mind whether I'd tell him or not.

So anyway, I was the one told her Millbourne was dead, and I pulled her through that just the way he helped her after her mother died—funny, isn't it? And now we're pretty close, and there's only one thing on my mind.... I have these pills, see, and the gizmo. And my camera, and I should throw them away, shouldn't I?

But I—but I—

Look, will you do something for me? I mean, seeing that you're for real....

It's You!

"It's you!"

It wasn't the hair that made him cry out like that, though God knows California's enough to turn anyone into a hair freak these days; well she was enough by herself with that silken waterfall of coppery-canary to freak you, and it wasn't that or the crinkle-cornered arch on arch of the eye and brow or the perfect teeth, not by themselves. It wasn't even the absolute confidence with which she wore the see-through shirt through which he saw the absolute confidence of her breasts, or even that she was exactly tall enough and round enough. More than anything else, it was that she was real.

Everybody does this thing, although some cats know it more than others: you see chicks, you see pix, you add and subtract and over the years things settle in—just so big, just so dark, just so—just exactly so until it's all finished. Then that finished thing, that her, settles down inside you and every time you see someone, or in a magazine, or at the show, you set it up against her. It could be great, you could get excited, you could dream a lot about any of the others, but somehow they never, never check out with the her you've made.

So when he saw her he yelled it out. It came out of him and he hadn't known he was going to say it, it hit him that hard. Maybe that's how you know—it bursts out of you without a thought.

He'd just parked the Monster and was half in, half out when he saw her. She was hitchhiking with a girl friend—they do that a lot in California. He was never able to remember much about that girlfriend, Susie or Dottie or something. Maybe he never saw her, much. There was this truck parked off the road with berries and corn-on-the-cob and tomatoes and stuff, and he liked corn and that was why he stopped. He walked over to the two girls and pointed at the Monster and said, "I'll be right with you." They smiled at him and looked him over, and at each other, checking him out, and then said Thanks and went over to the car. Something developed fists inside his chest and began hitting him

from inside so hard he blinked with each beat. He went over to the truck and bought corn, a couple of ears. He lived by himself.

But before he picked it up he went back to the Monster.

They'd got themselves somehow into the one bucket seat. He asked her, "Do you like corn?" She said she did. He went back and got a couple more and some tomatoes and a canteloupe, and then he saw the stocks, long clusters of white and purple flowers with a heavy scent that nobody's ever put in a bottle yet. He bought one white bunch and one purple and mixed them together right there into one big bunch, and he had never done anything like that in his life before.

They went first to the girlfriend's house. Without remembering the girlfriend much, he long remembered the thick waves of disapproval she set up when she got out and the other one, her, didn't. It made him laugh when he pulled away from the curb and they were alone together, and he met her eyes and she was laughing too.

She lived in Altadena, which was a hell of a haul away from where he lived, but he didn't mind. Oh, he didn't mind. She lived in a little two-room guest house the other side of a swimming pool; the people in the big house hardly ever used it. It had its own little driveway. It was nice. She said she would cook the corn for him. She did, with some lamb chops she had in the freezer, and they ate the canteloupe with vanilla ice cream on it and a pinch of dry instant coffee sprinkled on it. She could cook. You could tell. There were more than forty herbs and spices in the kitchen. She made up a name for him, Knightly. She said he looked like a knight in shining armor. He never did call her by her name, except sometimes Hon.

It was one of those hot smoggy California evenings and the pool looked good, but he didn't have a suit. She laughed at him and said who needs it? When she peeled off the see-through top he saw it wasn't a see-through at all, no more than a stained-glass window is a see-through when you want to look at the sun. There can't be a more perfect body than that one, not anywhere, not only for the perfection of each part, but for the absolute rightness of a breast like that with a shoulder like that, and a waist that turned just so together with such slender ankles. Also, all her hair was that same yellowy-coppery color and there wasn't a flaw on her skin anywhere.

They fell into the pool and laughed a lot, and you are not going to believe this easily but it's true: there was something about the way she did it all, something about the way she was, that made him not touch her then. They dried off on some of a mountain of thick clean towels she had and got dressed again and he never made the first pass. Maybe it was because passes often get made because a guy just has to find out where it's at, and in this case he knew where it was at. They both knew. It happened later, much later, about two in the morning, after which (it was pretty wonderful) she said softly "Knightly-night" and fell asleep in his arms. He didn't go home until Saturday.

On the way back to his place he stopped at a Rents and hired a 6-by-10 trailer. They had a hell of a job rigging a hitch for it on the Monster without bashing those beautiful chrome pipes, and it took a half hour to figure a way to get the big right-hand rearview mounted, and when he took off he was one hell of a sight. It was like a racehorse hitched to a manure spreader and people all over stopped in their tracks to watch him go by, and he was sure that one sideswipe on the freeway was caused by some yokel rubbernecking him. At his place he loaded on everything he owned, which wasn't really too much. He was paid till the end of the month but screw it. He took it all out to the guest house in Altadena.

She was supposed to clear out the second room for him but when he got there she had rearranged the whole house so that there was a real living room and a real bedroom instead of the overlap she'd had before. There was plenty of room in the closet for his clothes—more than he needed—but she'd fixed up everything else so perfectly that there was really no place to put anything of his, and anyway, who needed it? It was an Our House.

He was on Emergency then, which had always suited him fine. He was one of those lucky people who went to sleep bang whenever he felt tired, and could wake up—all the way up—in twenty minutes or two hours or ten, whatever was handy, and any part of the twenty-four was all right with him. She was a day people, however, and midnight was late to her always, and 8 A.M. was late too. She liked to be up before seven. He adjusted to that pretty well, and also learned not to talk when she was going through the complicated secret ritual of getting to sleep. Some

people are like that. They have to do whatever it is they do to get to sleep, everything in the right order and skipping none of it, and if you interrupt, they have to go back to the beginning and start over. She wouldn't sleep late, not ever, so when he'd kept her up late she looked drawn and kind of sad all the next day and evening. He also found out she would go to sleep almost instantly after sex, when it was good, and it was almost always good. But the whole sleep thing was hard to handle while he was on Emergency and would get calls at two and three in the morning and get out and not know when he'd be back. She was sweet about it—she was sweet about everything—but after awhile he put in for the day shift. It meant a little less money, but what the hell.

He quit going to Mother's, which believe it or not is a chain of pool halls in the L.A. area. Nobody said he couldn't, but pool or snooker just wasn't her thing, and when he played with her sitting patiently smiling in the front of the place and waiting for him to get done, it wasn't the same. She was nice as could be to Scruffy and Ralph and Rod and the rest, and even the Blinker, even though she didn't dig him. Well, you had to know the Blinker. And the way she did it was great, warm and lively with all of them but there was never any doubt as to whose girl she was and meant to be. But ... it wasn't the same, and pretty soon he went less and less and didn't see the herd at Mother's any more. Likewise the hangarounds at Butch's Aircooled, except when something on the Monster needed fixing, which wasn't often. Once when he went down for new connectors on his tach he found himself taking an hour instead of ten minutes to put them in, and driving away he felt a single wild strong tug inside him that he just couldn't understand. Well they were just a bunch of greasy cats who couldn't talk or think anything but chops and cams and pots and mags and slicks, but....

In the first couple of days she gave him a medallion on a chain around his neck, a funny little twist of silver with a flat piece of fire opal on it, and he wore it night and day. For a long time he wore it swinging outside and was glad to say "My chick," when someone asked about it.

His subscriptions to *Car and Driver* and *Road and Track* got screwed up somehow and six weeks went by and he didn't even miss them. You have to know him to know what that really

meant. He was very content. He'd tell her that every once in a while just to see her light up. He told himself that too. He bought the magazines at the newsstand and when the next issues came out she threw away the old ones. He was a little shook, and although he didn't say anything, he kept the magazines at work after that.

One morning the alarm went off and he rolled out and fumbled for his clothes and they felt different. Instead of the black tight cords and the Western shirt with the rawhide on the pockets, there were a pair of black jeans, real tailored, with slightly bell bottoms and a dark dull kind of paisley print shirt with a scarf and ring attached to it. They were really cool and he liked them but he said hell, he couldn't go to work in them, he'd look like a peacock. She lay in the bed watching him with a say-you-like-them, pent-up joy on her face. She'd made them herself secretly whenever she could snatch the time when he wasn't around, and kept hiding the pieces before he came back until they were all done. So he said what she wanted to hear and he did wear them to work that once, although he wore the medallion inside his shirt instead of outside. Sure enough the crew gave him a rough time about it and when he came home he said he'd save the bells and the paisley for parties, they were too good to risk at work. And he got to the trash before they collected it and found his black cords and Western shirt and put them away in the garage in a box with the rest of his stuff still out there. He never knew why and nobody asked him but he wore the medallion inside his shirt after that.

She made him three more pairs of pants and two more shirts, and they were really great, but for parties. They'd go to parties, people she'd known a long time. They were okay parties. He never liked drinking much but he'd drink a little sometimes and like it a little, and he could take pot or leave it alone. Only sometimes after a party where he had laughed a lot, he would leave with a strange feeling that he had just crossed a desert. It could be full of people but there just wasn't anybody to talk to. One time he parked outside one of the parties and there in the dark under a tree was a silver Excalibur. He always said an Excalibur was a piece of candy, but secretly he thought it was a whole big heap of wheels, and if anybody ever offered to swap him for the Monster he'd keep the Monster, but he sure would

think it over a lot. So when they got inside he made it his business to find out who was driving it, and he had his mouth all set to sit down and really talk, but it turned out to belong to some rich chick whose daddy had given it to her for her eighteenth birthday and she didn't know an axle from an ax handle. That one time he really felt cheated and mad, and it was the first time he felt dead sure he couldn't explain it and drove home too fast without talking and scared her a bit, and wouldn't talk after they got home either.

Also she cut his hair. She could do that. She could do anything she tried, and she did it well. It looked great. It was a lot different but it really did look fine.

One night after some sex, and it really was the most, and she slipped off to sleep in the way she had, he lay thinking about things and remembered something about rollbars and anti-sways he had read somewhere, but couldn't pin it down. He got up carefully and went out to the Monster and got the flashlight and went into the garage and got out the boxes with the back issues in them, and squatted there looking them over for so long his feet went numb and the batteries quit. He sat there in the dark banging his heels against the concrete to wake them up and you know something? he felt wonderful. He put away the magazines in the boxes and then put away the boxes and limped back into the house and to bed. He didn't think she knew.

He bought heavy-duty batteries first thing next day, and about a week later it happened again just the same way. He didn't figure out what was happening—he was not the figuring-out kind, maybe. But the third or fourth time it happened he was kneeling in the middle of the concrete floor with a drag pictorial on steam turbines down at the bottom of his tunnel of light when he heard something. He switched off his flash and the color print of a bright red three-wheel squirt, with the driver in prone position, faded from his eyes to be replaced by her shadowy naked figure in the doorway.

He said, "Well, I didn't want you to wake up."

She said the only bitter thing she had ever said to him. She pointed at his crotch and said, "You use that as a kind of sleeping pill for me, don't you?" Then she went back inside.

He stayed to pack away the magazines and then followed.

She seemed to be asleep so he got in quietly and did not touch

her. They did not talk about it in the morning.

That night they went to another party, and no less than three cats told him at different times how great his threads were. Well, she had good taste, she knew what looked good. The party was beautiful people and two guitars and a side table full of things made of rice and a lot of different kinds of cheese and wine—a desert. When they got home she went to bed and he went into the bathroom to get rid of the desert inside and out, and a terrible thing happened to him. He looked into the mirror and did not know who that was in there.

I mean it was a great haircut and the guru-style collar on the cotton-satin shirt-jacket was so well-cut it did not look freaky, and then there were the deep-buffed reversed-calf boots, like suede so nappy it was almost fur. But none of it was him, nothing he remembered, nothing he ever thought about when he thought Me. A terrible thing.

He took off all the clothes and hung them up and put them and the shoes away. Then he took off the medallion and put it on the TV and went to bed and right to sleep.

She was up ahead of him as usual and breakfast was ready.

He went out into the garage naked and found his black cords and the Western shirt with the rawhide on the pockets, and his old lineman's boots, and put them all on. He came in and ate. While he was eating she told him she had done everything in the world to make him happy. He agreed that she had and said it had all been great.

It was Saturday and he hopped in the Monster and went down to the Rents. He felt very strange, holding something inside of himself locked down tight, knowing it was no good to let it all out because he couldn't explain it to anybody if he did. They remembered him all right and got the 6-by-10 hitched on and the mirror mounted in half the time. He drove back to the house and up the driveway to the garage and loaded all his stuff into the trailer. It didn't take too long.

She came out and watched him finish. "Come inside."

He just shook his head and vaulted into the bucket. She came over and stood beside the Monster, holding her hands together real tight. "Knightly, Knightly, what is it? Tell me what's the matter."

He could only stare blindly at the tachometer. The only thing

that came to him seemed so crazy he could not bring himself to say it: I want my real name back. He said, "I'm no good at explaining things, Hon."

But she was. She knelt by the Monster so he could look down into those double-arched eyes in that frame of coppery-yellow, and she said how she had been thinking and thinking, and she realized how wrong she had been. She began a whole list of promises. She said, "I'll try to learn about cars and go with you to the dragstrips and the shops. I'll pick it up quickly, and then I'll pay more attention to the way you want to look and not the way I want you to look. And I never realized it but I shouldn't've made you quit the Emergency and live the way I live." And more, like about she never had found out what he used to eat before he met her, she just cooked what she thought he ought to like without asking. She would change, she would change. Any way he wanted her to, she would change.

He almost had a thought worth saying, something about what happened to people when they had to change, but he couldn't get it into shape. Maybe later she could figure it out for herself. He started the motor and shifted into low and checked the mirrors on both sides, and then throttled way back so she could hear him. He said, as he began slipping the clutch, "It ain't any of those things, Hon.

"It's you."

Slow Sculpture

She didn't know who he was when she met him; well, not many people did. He was in the high orchard doing something under a pear tree. The land smelled of late summer and wind: bronze, it smelled bronze. He looked up at a compact girl in her mid-twenties, with a fearless face and eyes the same color as her hair, which was extraordinary because her hair was red-gold. She looked down at a leather-skinned man in his forties with a gold-leaf electroscope in his hand, and felt she was an intruder. She said, "Oh," in what was apparently the right way, because he nodded once and said, "Hold this," and there could then be no thought of intrusion. She knelt down by him and took the instrument, holding it just where he positioned her hand, and then he moved a little away and struck a tuning-fork against his kneecap. "What's it doing?" He had a good voice, the kind of voice strangers notice and listen to.

She looked at the delicate leaves of gold in the glass shield of the electroscope. "They're moving apart."

He struck the tuning fork again and the leaves pressed away from one another. "Much?"

"About forty-five degrees when you hit the fork."

"Good—that's about the most we'll get." From a pocket of his bush jacket he drew a sack of chalk-dust and dropped a small handful on the ground. "I'll move now. You stay right there and tell me how much the leaves separate."

He traveled around the pear tree in a zigzag course, striking his tuning fork while she called out numbers—ten degrees, thirty, five, twenty, nothing. Whenever the gold foil pressed apart to maximum, forty degrees or more, he dropped more chalk. When he was finished the tree was surrounded, in a rough oval, by the white dots of chalk. He took out a notebook and diagrammed them and the tree, and put away the book, and took the electroscope out of her hands. "Were you looking for something?" he asked her.

"No," she said. "Yes."

He could smile. Though it did not last long, she found it very surprising in a face like that. "That's not what is called, in a court of law, a responsive answer."

She glanced across the hillside, metallic in that late light. There wasn't much on it—rocks, weeds the summer was done with, a tree or so, and then the orchard. Anyone present had come a long way to get here. "It wasn't a simple question," she said, tried to smile, and burst into tears.

She was sorry and said so.

"Why?" he asked. This was the first time she was to experience this ask-the-next-question thing of his. It was unsettling. It always would be—never less, sometimes a great deal more. "Well—one doesn't have emotional explosions in public."

"You do. I don't know this 'one' you're talking about."

"I—guess I don't either, now that you mention it."

"Tell the truth then. No sense in going round and round about it, 'he'll think that I—' and the like. I'll think what I think, whatever you say. Or—go on down the mountain and just don't say any more." She did not turn to go, so he added, "Try the truth, then. If it's important, it's simple, and if it's simple it's easy to say."

"I'm going to die!" she cried.

"So am I."

"I have a lump in my breast."

"Come up to the house and I'll fix it."

Without another word he turned away and started through the orchard. Startled half out of her wits, indignant and full of insane hope, experiencing, even, a quick curl of astonished laughter, she stood for a moment watching him go, and then found herself (at what point did I decide?) running after him.

She caught up with him on the uphill margin of the orchard.
"Are you a doctor?"

He appeared not to notice that she had waited, had run. "No," he said, and, walking on, appeared not to see her stand again pulling at her lower lip, then run again to catch up.

"I must be out of my mind," she said, joining him on a garden path. She said it to herself, which he must have known because he did not answer. The garden was alive with defiant chrysanthemums and a pond in which she saw the flicker of a pair of redcap imperials—silver, not gold fish—which were the

largest she had ever seen. Then—the house.

First it was part of the garden, with its colonnaded terrace, and then, with its rock walls (too big to be called fieldstone) part of the mountain. It was on and in the hillside, and its roofs paralleled the skylines, front and sides, and part of it was backed against an out-jutting cliff face. The door, beamed and studded and with two archers' slits, was opened for them (but there was no one there) and when it closed it was silent, a far more solid exclusion of things outside than any click or clang of latch or bolt. She stood with her back against it watching him cross what seemed to be the central well of the house, or at least this part of it. It was a kind of small court in the center of which was an atrium, glazed on all of its five sides and open to the sky at the top. In it was a tree, a cypress or juniper, gnarled and twisted and with the turned-back, paralleled, sculptured appearance of what the Japanese call bonsai.

"Aren't you coming?" he called, holding open a door behind the atrium.

"Bonsai just aren't fifteen feet tall," she said.

"This one is."

She came by it slowly, looking. "How long have you had it?"

His tone of voice said he was immensely pleased. It is a clumsiness to ask the owner of a bonsai how old it is; you are then demanding to know if it is his work or if he has acquired and continued the concept of another; you are tempting him to claim for his own the concept and the meticulous labor of someone else, and it becomes rude to tell a man he is being tested. Hence "How long have you had it?" is polite, forebearing, profoundly courteous. He answered, "Half my life." She looked at the tree. Trees can be found, sometimes, not quite discarded, not quite forgotten, potted in rusty gallon cans in not quite successful nurseries, unsold because they are shaped oddly or have dead branches here and there, or because they have grown too slowly in whole or part. These are the ones which develop interesting trunks and a resistance to misfortune that makes them flourish if given the least excuse for living. This one was far older than half this man's life, or all of it. Looking at it, she was terrified by the unbidden thought that a fire, a family of squirrels, some subterranean worm or termite could end this beauty—something working outside any concept of rightness or justice or ... or

respect. She looked at the tree. She looked at the man.

"Coming?"

"Yes," she said and went with him into his laboratory. "Sit down over there and relax," he told her. "This might take a little while."

"Over there" was a big leather chair by the bookcase. The books were right across the spectrum—reference works in medicine and engineering, nuclear physics, chemistry, biology, psychiatry. Also tennis, gymnastics, chess, the oriental war game Go, and golf. And then drama, the techniques of fiction, *Modern English Usage*, *The American Language* and supplement, Wood's and Walker's rhyming dictionaries and an array of other dictionaries and encyclopedias. A whole long shelf of biographies. "You have quite a library."

He answered her rather shortly: clearly he did not want to talk just now, for he was very busy. He said only, "Yes I have—perhaps you'll see it some time," which left her to pick away at his words to find out what on earth he meant by them. He could only have meant, she decided, that the books beside her chair were what he kept handy for his work—that his real library was elsewhere. She looked at him with a certain awe.

And she watched him. She liked the way he moved—swiftly, decisively. Clearly he knew what he was doing. He used some equipment that she recognized—a glass still, titration equipment, a centrifuge. There were two refrigerators, one of which was not a refrigerator at all, for she could see the large indicator on the door: it stood at 70°F. It came to her that a modern refrigerator is perfectly adaptable to the demand for controlled environment, even a warm one.

But all that, and the equipment she did not recognize, was only furniture. It was the man who was worth watching, the man who kept her occupied so that not once in all the long time she sat there was she tempted toward the bookshelves.

At last he finished a long sequence at the bench, threw some switches, picked up a tall stool and came over to her. He perched on the stool, hung his heels on the cross-spoke, and lay a pair of long brown hands over his knees. "Scared?"

"I s'pose I am."

"You don't have to stay."

"Considering the alternative," she began bravely, but the

courage-sound somehow oozed out, "it can't matter much."

"Very sound," he said, almost cheerfully. "I remember when I was a kid there was a fire scare in the apartment house where we lived. It was a wild scramble to get out, and my ten-year-old brother found himself outside in the street with an alarm clock in his hand. It was an old one and it didn't work—but of all the things in the place he might have snatched up at a time like that, it turned out to be the clock. He's never been able to figure out why."

"Have you?"

"Not why he picked that particular thing, no. But I think I know why he did something obviously irrational. You see, panic is a very special state. Like fear and flight, or fury and attack, it's a pretty primitive reaction to extreme danger. It's one of the expressions of the will to survive. What makes it so special is that it's irrational. Now, why would the abandonment of reason be a survival mechanism?"

She thought about this seriously. There was that about this man which made serious thought imperative. "I can't imagine," she said finally. "Unless it's because, in some situations, reason just doesn't work."

"You can imagine," he said, again radiating that huge approval, making her glow. "And you just did. If you are in danger and you try reason, and reason doesn't work, you abandon it. You can't say it's unintelligent to abandon what doesn't work, right? So then you are in panic; then you start to perform random acts. Most of them—far and away most will be useless; some might even be dangerous, but that doesn't matter—you're in danger already. Where the survival factor comes in is that away down deep you know that one chance in a million is better than no chance at all. So—here you sit—you're scared and you could run; something says you should run; but you won't."

She nodded.

He went on: "You found a lump. You went to a doctor and he made some tests and gave you the bad news. Maybe you went to another doctor and he confirmed it. You then did some research and found out what was to happen next—the exploratory, the radical, the questionable recovery, the whole long agonizing procedure of being what they call a terminal case. You then flipped out. Did some things you hope I won't ask you about.

Took a trip somewhere, anywhere, wound up in my orchard for no reason." He spread the good hands and let them go back to their kind of sleep. "Panic. The reason for little boys in their pajamas standing at midnight with a broken alarm clock in their arms, and for the existence of quacks." Something chimed over on the bench and he gave her a quick smile and went back to work, saying over his shoulder: "I'm not a quack, by the way. To qualify as a quack you have to claim to be a doctor. I don't."

She watched him switch off, switch on, stir, measure and calculate. A little orchestra of equipment chorused and soloed around him as he conducted, whirring, hissing, clicking, flickering. She wanted to laugh, to cry, and to scream. She did no one of these things for fear of not stopping, ever.

When he came over again, the conflict was not raging within her, but exerting steady and opposed tensions; the result was a terrible stasis, and all she could do when she saw the instrument in his hand was to widen her eyes. She quite forgot to breathe.

"Yes, it's a needle," he said, his tone almost bantering. "A long shiny sharp needle. Don't tell me you are one of those needle-shy people." He flipped the long power-cord which trailed from the black housing around the hypodermic, to get some slack, and straddled the stool. "Want something to steady your nerves?"

She was afraid to speak; the membrane containing her sane self was very thin, stretched very tight.

He said, "I'd rather you didn't, because this pharmaceutical stew is complex enough as it is. But if you need it...."

She managed to shake her head a little, and again she felt the wave of approval from him. There were a thousand questions she wanted to ask—had meant to ask—needed to ask: What was in the needle? How many treatments must she have? What would they be like? How long must she stay, and where? And most of all — Oh, could she live, could she live?

He seemed concerned with the answer to only one of these.

"It's mostly built around an isotope of potassium. If I told you all I know about it and how I came on it in the first place, it would take—well, more time than we've got. But here's the general idea: Theoretically, every atom is electrically balanced (never mind ordinary exceptions). Likewise all electrical charges in the molecule are supposed to be balanced—so much plus, so much minus, total zero. I happened on the fact that the balance

of charges in a wild cell is not zero—not quite. It's as if there was a submicroscopic thunderstorm going on at the molecular level, with little lightning bolts flashing back and forth and changing the signs. Interfering with communications—static—and that,” he said, gesturing with the shielded hypo in his hand, “is what this is all about. When something interferes with communications—especially the RNA mechanism, which says, Read this blueprint and build accordingly, and stop when it's done—when that message gets garbled, lopsided things get built, off-balance things, things which do almost what they should, do it almost right: they're wild cells, and the messages they pass on are even worse.

“Okay: Whether these thunderstorms are caused by viruses or chemicals or radiation or physical trauma or even anxiety—and don't think anxiety can't do it—that's secondary. The important thing is to fix it so the thunderstorm can't happen. If you can do that, the cells have plenty of ability all by themselves to repair and replace what's gone wrong. And biological systems aren't like ping-pong balls with static charges waiting for the charge to leak away or to discharge into a grounded wire. They have a kind of resilience—I call it forgiveness—which enables them to take on a little more charge, or a little less, and do all right. Well then: Say a certain clump of cells is wild and say it carries an aggregate of a hundred units extra on the positive side. Cells immediately around it are affected, but not the next layer or the next.

“If they could be opened to the extra charge, if they could help to drain it off, they would, well, cure the wild cells of the surplus, you see what I mean? And they would be able to handle that little overage themselves, or pass it on to other cells and still others who could deal with it. In other words, if I can flood your body with some medium which can drain off and distribute a concentration of this unbalanced charge, the ordinary bodily processes will be free to move in and clear up the wild-cell damage. And that's what I have here.”

He held the shielded needle between his knees and from a side pocket of his lab coat he took a plastic box, opened it and drew out an alcohol swab. Still cheerfully talking, he took her terror-numbed arm and scrubbed at the inside of her elbow. “I am not for one second implying that nuclear charges in the atom are the same thing as static electricity. They're in a different league

altogether. But the analogy holds. I could use another analogy. I could liken the charge on the wild cells to accumulations of fat, and this gunk of mine to a detergent, which would break it up and spread it so far it couldn't be detected any more. But I'm led to the static analogy by an odd side effect—organisms injected with this stuff do build up one hell of a static charge. It's a by-product, and for reasons I can only theorize about at the moment, it seems to be keyed to the audio spectrum. Tuning forks and the like. That's what I was playing with when I met you. That tree is drenched with this stuff. It used to have a whorl of wild-cell growth. It hasn't any more." He gave her the quick surprising smile and let it click away as he held the needle point upward and squirted it. With his other hand wrapped around her left biceps, he squeezed gently and firmly. The needle was lowered and placed and slid into the big vein so deftly that she gasped—not because it hurt, but because it did not. Attentively he watched the bit of glass barrel protruding from a black housing as he withdrew the plunger a fraction and saw the puff of red into the colorless fluid inside, and then he bore steadily on the plunger again.

"Please don't move.... I'm sorry; this will take a little time. I have to get quite a lot of this into you. Which is fine, you know," he said, resuming the tone of his previous remarks about audio spectra, "because side effect or no, it's consistent. Healthy biosystems develop a strong electrostatic field, unhealthy ones a weak one or none at all. With an instrument as primitive and simple as that little electroscope you can tell if any part of the organism has a community of wild cells, and if so, where it is and how big and how wild." Deftly he shifted his grip on the encased hypodermic without moving the point or varying the amount of plunger pressure.

It was beginning to be uncomfortable, an ache turning into a bruise. "And if you're wondering why this mosquito has a housing on it with a wire attached (although I'll bet you're not and that you know as well as I do that I'm doing all this talking just to keep your mind occupied!) I'll tell you. It's nothing but a coil carrying a high-frequency alternating current. The alternating field sees to it that the fluid is magnetically and electrostatically neutral right from the start." He withdrew the needle suddenly and smoothly, bent her arm, and trapped in the inside of her

elbow a cotton swab.

"Nobody ever told me that before or after a treatment," she said.

"What?"

"No charge," she said.

Again that wave of approval, this time with words: "I like your style. How do you feel?"

She cast about for accurate phrases. "Like the owner of a large sleeping hysteria begging someone not to wake it up."

He laughed. "In a little while you are going to feel so weird you won't have time for hysteria." He got up and returned the needle to the bench, looping up the cable as he went. He turned off the AC field and returned with a large glass bowl and a square of plywood. He inverted the bowl on the floor near her and placed the wood on its broad base.

"I remember something like that," she said. "When I was in—in junior high school. They were generating artificial lightning with a ... let me see ... well, it had a long endless belt running over pulleys and some little wires scraping on it and a big copper ball on top."

"Van de Graaf generator."

"Right! And they did all sorts of things with it, but what I specially remember is standing on a piece of wood on a bowl like that and they charged me up with the generator, and I didn't feel much of anything except all my hair stood out from my head. Everyone laughed. I looked like a golliwog. They said I was carrying forty thousand volts."

"Good! I'm glad you remember that. This'll be a little different, though. By roughly another forty thousand."

"Oh!"

"Don't worry. Long as you're insulated, and as long as grounded, or comparatively grounded objects—me, for example—stay well away from you, there won't be any fireworks."

"Are you going to use a generator like that?"

"Not like that, and I already did. You're the generator."

"I'm—oh!" She had raised her hand from the upholstered chair arm and there was a crackle of sparks and the faint smell of ozone.

"Oh you sure are, and more than I thought, and quicker. Get up!"

She started up slowly; she finished the maneuver with speed. As her body separated from the chair she was, for a fractional second, seated in a tangle of spitting blue-white threads. They, or she, propelled her a yard and a half away, standing. Literally shocked half out of her wits, she almost fell.

"Stay on your feet!" he snapped, and she recovered, gasping. He stepped back a pace. "Get up on the board. Quick, now!"

She did as she was told, leaving, for the two paces she traveled, two brief footprints of fire. She teetered on the board. Visibly, her hair began to stir. "What's happening to me?" she cried.

"You're getting charged after all," he said jovially, but at this point she failed to appreciate the extension of even her own witticism. She cried again, "What's happening to me?"

"It's all right," he said consolingly. He went to the bench and turned on a tone generator. It moaned deep in the one to three hundred cycle range. He increased the volume and turned the pitch control. It howled upward and as it did so her red-gold hair shivered and swept up and out, each hair attempting frantically to get away from all the others. He ran the tone up above ten thousand cycles and all the way back to a belly-bumping inaudible eleven; at the extremes her hair slumped, but at around eleven hundred it stood out in (as she had described it) golliwog style.

He turned down the gain to a more or less bearable level and picked up the electroscope. He came toward her, smiling. "You are an electroscope, you know that? And a living Van de Graaf generator as well. And a golliwog."

"Let me down," was all she could say.

"Not yet. Please hang tight. The differential between you and everything else here is so high that if you got near any of it you'd discharge into it. It wouldn't harm you—it isn't current electricity—but you might get a burn and a nervous shock out of it." He held out the electroscope; even at that distance, and in her distress, she could see the gold leaves writhe apart. He circled her, watching the leaves attentively, moving the instrument forward and back and from side to side. Once he went to the tone generator and turned it down some more. "You're sending such a strong field I can't pick up the variations," he explained, and returned to her, closer now.

"I can't, much more ... I can't," she murmured; he did not hear,

or he did not care. He moved the electroscope near her abdomen, up and from side to side.

"Yup. There you are!" he said cheerfully, moving the instrument close to her right breast.

"What?" she whimpered.

"Your cancer. Right breast, low, around toward the armpit." He whistled. "A mean one, too. Malignant as hell."

She swayed and then collapsed forward and down. A sick blackness swept down on her, receded explosively in a glare of agonizing blue-white, and then crashed down on her like a mountain falling.

Place where wall meets ceiling. Another wall, another ceiling. Hadn't seen it before. Didn't matter. Don't care.

Sleep.

Place where wall meets ceiling. Something in the way. His face, close, drawn, tired; eyes awake though and penetrating. Doesn't matter. Don't care.

Sleep.

Place where wall meets ceiling. Down a bit, late sunlight.

Over a little, rusty-gold chrysanthemums in a goldgreen glass cornucopia. Something in the way again: his face.

"Can you hear me?"

Yes, but don't answer. Don't move. Don't speak.

Sleep.

It's a room, a wall, a table, a man pacing; a nighttime window and mums you'd think were alive, but don't you know they're cut right off and dying?

Do they know that?

"How are you?" Urgent, urgent.

"Thirsty."

Cold and a bite to it that aches the hinges of the jaws. Grapefruit juice. Lying back on his arm while he holds the glass in the other hand, oh no, that's not ... "Thank you. Thanks very —" Try to sit up, the sheet—my clothes!

"Sorry about that," he said, the mindreader-almost. "Some

things that have to be done just aren't consistent with panty-hose and a minidress. All washed and dried and ready for you, though —any time. Over there."

The brown wool and the panty-hose and the shoes, on the chair. He's respectful, standing back, putting the glass next to an insulated carafe on the night-table.

"What things?"

"Throwing up. Bedpans," he said candidly.

Protective with the sheet, which can hide bodies but oh not embarrassment. "Oh I'm sorry.... Oh I must've—" Shake head and he slides back and forth in the vision.

"You went into shock, and then you just didn't come out of it." He hesitated. It was the first time she had ever seen him hesitate over anything. She became for a moment an almost-mind-reader: Should I tell her what's in my mind? Sure he should, and he did: "You didn't want to come out of it."

"It's all gone out of my head."

"The pear tree, the electroscope. The injection, the electrostatic response."

"No," she said, not knowing, then, knowing: "No!"

"Hang on!" he rapped, and next thing she knew he was by the bed, over her, his two hands hard on her cheeks. "Don't slip off again. You can handle it. You can handle it because it's all right now, do you understand that? You're all right!"

"You told me I had cancer." It sounded pouty, accusing. He laughed at her, actually laughed.

"You told me you had it."

"Oh, but I didn't know."

"That explains it, then," he said in a load-off-my-back tone. "There wasn't anything in what I did that could cause a three-day withdrawal like that; it had to be something in you."

"Three days!"

He simply nodded in response to that and went on with what he was saying. "I get a little pompous once in a while," he said engagingly. "Comes from being right so much of the time. Took a bit more for granted than I should have, didn't I? when I assumed you'd been to a doctor, maybe even had a biopsy. You didn't, did you?"

"I was afraid," she admitted. She looked at him. "My mother died of it, and my aunt, and my sister had a radical mastectomy. I

couldn't bear it. And when you—”

“When I told you what you already knew, and what you never wanted to hear, you couldn't take it. You blacked right out, you know. Fainted away, and it had nothing to do with the seventy-odd thousand volts of static you were carrying. I caught you.” He put out his arms and instinctively she shrank back, but he held the arms where they were, on display, until she looked at them and saw the angry red scorch marks on his forearms and the heavy biceps, as much of them as she could see from under his short-sleeved shirt. “About nine-tenths knocked me out too,” he said, “but at least you didn't crack your head or anything.”

“Thank you,” she said reflexively, and then began to cry. “What am I going to do?”

“Do? Go back home, wherever that is—pick up your life again, whatever that might mean.”

“But you said—”

“When are you going to get it into your head that what I did was not a diagnostic?”

“Are you—did you—you mean you cured it?”

“I mean you're curing it right now. I explained it all to you before—you remember that now, don't you?”

“Not altogether, but—yes.” Surreptitiously (but not enough, because he saw her) she felt under the sheet for the lump. “It's still there.”

“If I bopped you over the head with a bat,” he said with slightly exaggerated simplicity, “there would be a lump on it. It would be there tomorrow and the next day. The day after that it might be smaller, and in a week you'd still be able to feel it, but it would be gone. Same thing here.”

At last she let the enormity of it touch her. “A one-shot cure for cancer....”

“Oh God,” he said harshly, “I can tell by looking at you that I am going to have to listen to that speech again. Well, I won't.”

Startled, she said, “What speech?”

“The one about my duty to humanity. It comes in two phases and many textures. Phase one has to do with my duty to humanity and really means we could make a classic buck with it. Phase two deals solely with my duty to humanity, and I don't hear that one very often. Phase two utterly overlooks the reluctance humanity has to accept good things unless they arrive

from accepted and respectable sources. Phase one is fully aware of this but gets very rat-shrewd in figuring ways around it.”

She said, “I don’t—” but could get no farther.

“The textures,” he overrode her, “are accompanied by the light of revelation, with or without religion and/or mysticism; or they are cast sternly in the ethical-philosophy mold and aim to force me to surrender through guilt mixed, to some degree all the way up to total, with compassion.”

“But I only—”

“You,” he said, aiming a long index finger at her, “have robbed yourself of the choicest example of everything I have just said. If my assumptions had been right and you had gone to your friendly local sawbones, and he had diagnosed cancer and referred you to a specialist, and he had done likewise and sent you to a colleague for consultation, and in random panic you had fallen into my hands and been cured, and had gone back to your various doctors to report a miracle, do you know what you’d have gotten from them? ‘Spontaneous remission,’ that’s what you’d have gotten. And it wouldn’t be only doctors,” he went on with a sudden renewal of passion, under which she quailed in her bed. “Everybody has his own commercial. Your nutritionist would have nodded over his wheat germ or his macrobiotic rice cakes, your priest would have dropped to his knees and looked at the sky, your geneticist would have a pet theory about generation skipping and would assure you that your grandparents probably had spontaneous remissions too and never knew it.”

“Please!” she cried, but he shouted at her: “Do you know what I am? I am an engineer twice over, mechanical and electrical, and I have a law degree. If you were foolish enough to tell anyone about what has happened here (which I hope you aren’t, but if you are I know how to protect myself) I could be jailed for practicing medicine without a license, you could have me up for assault because I stuck a needle into you and even for kidnapping if you could prove I carried you in here from the lab. Nobody would give a damn that I had cured your cancer. You don’t know who I am, do you?”

“No, I don’t even know your name.”

“And I won’t tell you. I don’t know your name, either—”

“Oh! It’s—”

“Don’t tell me! Don’t tell me! I don’t want to hear it! I wanted

to be involved with your lump and I was. I want it and you to be gone as soon as you're both up to it. Have I made myself absolutely clear?"

"Just let me get dressed," she said tightly, "and I'll leave right now!"

"Without making a speech?"

"Without making a speech." And in a flash her anger turned to misery and she added, "I was going to say I was grateful. Would that have been all right?"

And his anger underwent a change too, for he came close to the bed and sat down on his heel, bringing their faces to a level, and said quite gently, "That would be fine. Although ... you won't really be grateful for another ten days, when you get your 'spontaneous remission' reports, or maybe for six months or a year or two or five, when examinations keep on testing out negative."

She detected such a wealth of sadness behind this that she found herself reaching for the hand with which he steadied himself against the edge of the bed. He did not recoil, but he didn't seem to welcome it either. "Why can't I be grateful right now?"

"That would be an act of faith," he said bitterly, "and that just doesn't happen any more—if it ever did." He rose and went toward the door. "Please don't go tonight," he said. "It's dark and you don't know the way. I'll see you in the morning."

When he came back in the morning the door was open. The bed was made and the sheets were folded neatly on the chair, together with the pillow slips and the towels she had used. She wasn't there.

He came out into the entrance court and contemplated his bonsai.

Early sun gold-frosted the horizontal upper foliage of the old tree and brought its gnarled limbs into sharp relief, tough brown-gray and crevices of velvet. Only the companion of a bonsai (there are owners of bonsai, but they are a lesser breed) fully understands the relationship. There is an exclusive and individual tree-ness to the tree because it is a living thing, and living things change, and there are definite ways in which the tree desires to change. A man sees the tree and in his mind makes certain extensions and extrapolations of what he sees, and sets about

making them happen. The tree in turn will do only what a tree can do, will resist to the death any attempt to do what it cannot do, or to do it in less time than it needs. The shaping of a bonsai is therefore always a compromise and always a cooperation. A man cannot create bonsai, nor can a tree; it takes both, and they must understand each other. It takes a long time to do that. One memorizes one's bonsai, every twig, the angle of every crevice and needle, and, lying awake at night or in a pause a thousand miles away, one recalls this or that line or mass, one makes one's plans. With wire and water and light, with tilting and with the planting of water-robbing weeds or heavy root-shading ground cover, one explains to the tree what one wants, and if the explanation is well-enough made, and there is great enough understanding, the tree will respond and obey—almost. Always there will be its own self-respecting, highly individual variation: Very well, I shall do what you want, but I will do it my way. And for these variations, the tree is always willing to present a clear and logical explanation, and more often than not (almost smiling) it will make clear to the man that he could have avoided it if his understanding had been better.

It is the slowest sculpture in the world, and there is, at times, doubt as to which is being sculpted, man or tree.

So he stood for perhaps ten minutes watching the flow of gold over the upper branches, and then went to a carved wooden chest, opened it, shook out a length of disreputable cotton duck, opened the hinged glass at one side of the atrium, and spread the canvas over the roots and all the earth to one side of the trunk, leaving the rest open to wind and water. Perhaps in a while—a month or two—a certain shoot in the topmost branch would take the hint, and the uneven flow of moisture up through the cambium layer would nudge it away from that upward reach and persuade it to continue the horizontal passage. And perhaps not, and it would need the harsher language of binding and wire. But then it might have something to say, too, about the rightness of an upward trend, and would perhaps say it persuasively enough to convince the man; altogether, a patient, meaningful, and rewarding dialogue.

“Good morning.”

“Oh goddam!” he barked, “you made me bite my tongue. I thought you'd gone.”

“I did.” She knelt in the shadows with her back against the inner wall, facing the atrium. “But then I stopped to be with the tree for a while.”

“Then what?”

“I thought a lot.”

“What about?”

“You.”

“Did you now!”

“Look,” she said firmly, “I’m not going to any doctor to get this thing checked out. I didn’t want to leave until I had told you that, and until I was sure you believed me.”

“Come on in and we’ll get something to eat.”

Foolishly, she giggled. “I can’t. My feet are asleep.”

Without hesitation he scooped her up in his arms and carried her around the atrium. She said, her arm around his shoulders and their faces close, “Do you believe me?”

He continued around until they reached the wooden chest, then stopped and looked into her eyes. “I believe you. I don’t know why you decided that, but I’m willing to believe you.” He set her down on the chest and stood back.

“It’s that act of faith you mentioned,” she said gravely. “I thought you ought to have it, at least once in your life, so you can never say such a thing again.” She tapped her heels gingerly against the slate floor. “Ow.” She made a pained smile. “Pins and needles.”

“You must have been thinking for a long time.”

“Yes. Want more?”

“Sure.”

“You are an angry, frightened man.”

He seemed delighted. “Tell me about all that!”

“No,” she said quietly, “you tell me. I’m very serious about this. Why are you angry?”

“I’m not!”

“Why are you so angry?”

“I tell you I’m not! Although,” he added good-naturedly, “you’re pushing me in that direction.”

“Well then, why?”

He gazed at her for what, to her, seemed a very long time indeed. “You really want to know, don’t you?”

She nodded.

He waved a sudden hand, up and out. "Where do you suppose all this came from—the house, the land, the equipment?"

She waited.

"An exhaust system," he said, with a thickening of the voice she was coming to know. "A way of guiding exhaust gases out of internal-combustion engines in such a way that they are given a spin. Unburned solids are embedded in the walls of the muffler in a glass-wool liner that slips out in one piece and can be replaced by a clean one every couple of thousand miles. The rest of the exhaust is fired by its own spark plug and what will burn, burns. The heat is used to preheat the fuel; the rest is spun again through a five-thousand-mile cartridge. What finally gets out is, by today's standards at least, pretty clean; and because of the preheating, it actually gets better mileage out of the engine."

"So you've made a lot of money."

"I made a lot of money," he echoed. "But not because the thing is being used to cut down air pollution. I got the money because an automobile company bought it and buried it in a lock-box. They don't like it because it costs something to install in new cars. Some friends of theirs in the refining business don't like it because it gets high performance out of crude fuels. Well all right—I didn't know any better and I won't make the same mistake again. But yes—I'm angry. I was angry when I was a kid on a tankship and we were set to washing down bulkhead with chipped brown soap and canvas, and I went ashore and bought a detergent and tried it and it was better, faster and cheaper so I took it to the bos'n, who gave me a punch in the mouth for pretending to know his job better than he did.... Well, he was drunk at the time, but the rough part was when the old shellbacks in the crew got wind of it and ganged up on me for being what they called a 'company man'—that's a dirty name in a ship. I just couldn't understand why people got in the way of something better.

"I've been up against that all my life. I have something in my head that just won't quit: it's a way I have of asking the next question: Why is so-and-so the way it is? Why can't it be such-and-such instead? There is always another question to be asked about any thing or any situation; especially you shouldn't quit when you like an answer because there's always another one after it. And we live in a world where people just don't want to ask the

next question!

"I've been paid all my stomach will take for things people won't use, and if I'm mad all the time it's really my fault—I admit it; because I just can't stop asking that next question and coming up with answers. There's a half-dozen real blockbusters in that lab that nobody will ever see, and half a hundred more in my head; but what can you do in a world where people would rather kill each other in a desert even when they're shown it can turn green and bloom, where they'll fall all over themselves to pour billions into developing a new oil strike when it's been proved over and over again that the fossil fuels will kill us all?

"Yes, I'm angry. Shouldn't I be?"

She let the echoes of his voice swirl around the court and out through the hole in the top of the atrium, and waited a little longer to let him know he was here with her and not beside himself and his fury. He grinned at her sheepishly when he came to this, and she said:

"Maybe you're asking the next question instead of asking the right question. I think people who live by wise old sayings are trying not to think, but I know one worth paying some attention to. It's this: If you ask a question the right way, you've just given the answer." She paused to see if he was paying real attention. He was. She went on, "I mean, if you put your hand on a hot stove you might ask yourself, how can I stop my hand from burning? And the answer is pretty clear, isn't it? If the world keeps rejecting what you have to give, there's some way of asking why that contains the answer."

"It's a simple answer," he said shortly. "People are stupid."

"That isn't the answer and you know it," she said.

"What is?"

"Oh, I can't tell you that! All I know is that the way you do something, when people are concerned, is more important than what you do, if you want results. I mean ... You already know how to get what you want with the tree, don't you?"

"I'll be damned."

"People are living growing things too. I don't know a hundredth part of what you do about bonsai, but I do know this: when you start one, it isn't often the strong straight healthy ones you take. It's the twisted sick ones that can be made the most beautiful. When you get to shaping humanity, you might

remember that.”

“Of all the—I don’t know whether to laugh in your face or punch you right in the mouth!”

She rose. He hadn’t realized she was quite this tall. “I’d better go.”

“Come on now. You know a figure of speech when you hear one.”

“Oh, I didn’t feel threatened. But—I’d better go, all the same.” Shrewdly, he asked her, “Are you afraid to ask the next question?”

“Terrified.”

“Ask it anyway.”

“No!”

“Then I’ll do it for you. You said I was angry—and afraid. You want to know what I’m afraid of.”

“Yes.”

“You. I am scared to death of you.”

“Are you really?”

“You have a way of provoking honesty,” he said with some difficulty. “I’ll say what I know you’re thinking: I’m afraid of any close human relationship. I’m afraid of something I can’t take apart with a screwdriver or a mass spectroscope or a table of cosines and tangents.” His voice was jocular but his hands were shaking.

“You do it by watering one side,” she said softly, “or by turning it just so in the sun. You handle it as if it were a living thing, like a species or a woman or a bonsai. It will be what you want it to be if you let it be itself and take the time and the care.”

“I think,” he said, “that you are making me some kind of offer. Why?”

“Sitting there most of the night,” she said, “I had a crazy kind of image. Do you think two sick twisted trees ever made bonsai out of one another?”

“What’s your name?” he asked her.

The Girl Who Knew What They Meant

I came out of the motel office feeling—well, feeling whatever it is you feel when you've just gotten a phone call from somebody saying "You've got a week, Sam," and who will call once more: "You've got one more day, Sam," and then you're dead. I guess the only thing in the world that could have shifted my mind away from it even for a second would be a girl.

This one did, only for a second or maybe three. It was the dog first, I guess. Afghan. Always did like Afghans. Have a friend back East who knows this, once sent me a whole book on Afghans—history, care and feeding, show points, pictures of past champions. This one was a honey-colored bitch all long bones and silk, and that's about all I took in just then because of the girl. She had the dog on a plaited leash. She was dressed in baggy old Levis and an oversized man's white shirt with the tails out, which is a way Miss Universe could dress in a men's prison and not be noticed. But the sun was on her face and hair and her hair was just the color and even more silky than the Afghan's. Also her eyes were very wide apart and matched her hair and the dog and the sunlight, and she wasn't wearing a brassiere, which isn't easy to notice under such circumstances but I can. I have a glandular condition that makes me notice those things.

The whole thing stopped me in my tracks and I met her eyes, and I said (now you've got to believe me—of all the things in the whole wide world I might have said, I had to come out with this one) I said: "It's a beautiful day."

And she said, "Why, thank you." And smiled.

Then my two or three seconds were up and reality came crashing all around me with one more week, and one more phone call and bang you're dead, and I went back to my room to sweat it out.

But you can't stay feeling any particular way permanently, leastways not at the peak (like scared at that type of phone call) except maybe mad, and in a few hours the fear had gone back to the sprained-ankle kind of dull throb. It's not filling the world any

more, and it's with you every step of the way, but at least you can think of other things too.

And what I got to thinking of was this girl, and it wasn't only the way she looked. I got to playing back that conversation in my head. "It's a beautiful day."

"Why, thank you."

Now is that what they call in TV courtroom scenes "a responsive answer"?

Not if you look at the words. If you look at the words they don't make any sense at all. But you don't look at the words. You look at why I wanted to make contact, and what made me say what I said, of all stupid things, and how she answered that instead of the words. She knew just exactly what I meant.

I had a rush of brains to the head and got to rummaging around in the back of the closet where I'd thrown magazines and old Sunday papers, and there it was, the book. I got it out and banged the dust off it and went down to the office of the motel. It was a real cheap motel, twenty-one rooms and only one telephone which was fine on both counts. You can hide a lot if you live in a place like that. I found Mrs. Walker who came out of her apartment looking worried. She was the manager and how she looked didn't mean anything, she just had one of those worried faces.

I said, "Where's the chick with the dog?"

She said, "Now, Sam."

Is that responsive? I said, "Come on."

She said, "Number Five, but she's a nice girl, Sam." I guess if you look exactly at the words people use, it can get pretty weird. I mean they don't say what they're saying much at all, do they?

I crossed the court to Number 5 and rapped. After a bit the door opened a little bit. The white shirt was buttoned with three buttons only and she went to work on the fourth one as soon as her hand was off the doorknob.

"Here's a book you want to borrow from me."

"Book?" She looked at it as I held it up, and smiled. I didn't try to tell you what that smile was like the first time. I won't try about the second time either. She knew that book. "Oh, I always wanted a copy, but it's too expensive."

"Well you can take your time with it. Soon as I saw your dog I knew you'd want to have a look at it so I dug it out."

"I really appreciate it." That smile.

"It's all right." I backed off a step and made the OK sign with my free hand. "See you around." I started to walk off and heard the door close softly behind me. You don't push at first. Later you push.

Then I turned around and knocked again. She opened and I said, "You forgot to take the book."

She didn't laugh. "You forgot to give it to me." Then she opened the door all the way and made Come In with her hand.

I went in and put the book down on the dresser. It was a room like all the other rooms in the place—small, a double bed, plastic curtains with dust on them, walls with smog on them, suitcase-sized refrigerator with two electric burners bolted into the top and you could wash your dishes in the bathroom sink. For four bucks a night or ninety a month with linens and utilities, who cares? She had a piece of green glass, the kind they break out of a mold, big as my two fists, standing on the night table and some books, not the kind I ever read, and of course the dog. I scratched the dog in that hollow place under and behind the ear and she liked it.

I sat down on the one puffy grimy chair and she sat on the bed with one ankle under her. We talked about her working at the veterinarian's two blocks away and she couldn't get any place to live cheap enough with a dog. Animals. California, especially Southern California, LA is not like any other city in the world with a feeling to it, like a San Francisco feeling, a Chicago feeling, New York, New Orleans, they all have a special thing you would know in fifteen seconds with your eyes closed, but there is no such thing as a Los Angeles feeling. When you get to know it well you find there is a Pasadena kind of feeling that is not the same as Beverly Hills, and Encino sort of tastes different from Pacoima or Glendale, but there is no such thing as a real city-wide city flavor in LA. And I have a theory that no matter how long people live in LA they have no roots. They mostly come from other places and they had no roots there either, they cut them before they came or they just never had any, so it's like the whole place is adrift. And she said, "What's the matter?"

I said, "Nothing." I'd been laughing a lot too.

She made coffee and I heard about the guy she was going to get married to only he got drafted and meningitis in boot camp and

died, and how her folks made it so hard on her because they lived together before he went away and since then somehow her folks blamed her. "Not that they ever said that, but whatever they said, that's what they meant." Then we had dinner, she cooked it, she didn't have anything but eggs so we ate those, and somehow it was ten o'clock and we were talking about snapping turtles, how if you stand on them it doesn't hurt them but they pull in their necks and you can drill a hole in the edge of their shell to put a chain on and they never feel it, if you want to keep one for a pet, and all of a sudden she held out her arms and that was it.

She had the most beautiful body I have ever seen. She did not wear brassieres for three reasons. One was they made her feel bound up and she did not want to feel bound up in any way. The other two reasons, one was on the right and one on the left, big and firm and perfect and holding themselves up and out without help from anything. She didn't like to wear clothes at all, that was where it was at. I have seen that before, but always chicks who went for see-through clothes and low-cut this-and-thats, peepshow for everybody. With her it was a private personal thing. Once she said "When you're naked you can lie to another naked person but it's not easy." She was a tremendous lay and she did not know or use any tricks. She just was.

Well for three days she was at work or we were together every waking or sleeping minute. One night she woke me up and the whole room was like echoing. She said I was cussing in my sleep, shouting. She was afraid. She asked me what was the matter and I told her nothing. I tried to go to sleep again and she held me and I think I cried.

So I told her about Millikein, he had it figured I was responsible for what happened to his brother, he had his mind made up I had to die too. Millikein had more money than God, but I don't think that would have made any difference; he was a man who made his mind up and that was it. He made up his mind I was going to die on his kid brother's birthday and he told me a whole year ahead. I ran a lot and hid a lot but he always found me and called me up or wrote me a letter as soon as I stopped, or I would meet him on the street. He even bought a beer bar, called Bash West, up the street. He always talked real nice to me, and I could go see him any time I wanted to; the only thing was, I was going to get killed four days from now. If it was

a blackmail thing or something about money that I could pay off, well fine, but it wasn't. And what I told her was there wasn't any use going to the cops because who would listen to a story like that? I just didn't mention that if I got the cops smelling into my business with Millikein's brother, it could get even worse.

Well the next afternoon I was laying on my bed which I had swung around so I could see across the court toward Number 5, so I would know when she got home from work, and I saw this chick, and even with what was going down between me and the girl with the Afghan, the first look at what walked in to that motel court brought me bolt upright. I mean the skirt up to here and a see-through blouse with just a couple little pockets here and here, and the hair fixed just so, wow, and long legs and a front end the like of which I swear I had seen only once in my life, and that was in Number 5.

Well sure it was in Number 5. It wasn't till the chick took out her key that I realized it was the same girl. Just because she didn't like to wear clothes didn't mean she didn't have them or didn't know how to wear them.

I was over there so fast I don't know yet whether I went out my door or through it. She was in the bathroom in mesh panty-hose washing makeup off her face. Makeup. Her.

I said "Where have you been?" and she said with Millikein.

She said she had to see him, she had to find out if it was all true.

I said she thought I was a liar and she gave me a look so—I think tired is the word, such a long tired look I felt something wring inside. She said it wasn't that, she said she had to talk to him to see if he meant it. She said when people talked to her she knew what they meant. By this time I was willing to buy that, I'd seen it happen with her often enough. So I asked her what he said.

She dried her face and shook out her hair and came into the room. She took off the panty-hose and threw them in the corner. I never saw her do anything like that before. She fell down on the bed and told me he spoke real nice about me. He said he was just trying to throw a scare into me in case. He said he didn't have proof of nothing. He said really he thought I was a nice young guy, just irresponsible sometimes and not bad. He said to her not to say anything to me, really because of what had happened I

ought to have a good scare thrown into me, don't spoil it because it was doing me a lot of good in the long run.

I kind of blew my top at her because she nosed into it and I called her some things that hurt, I guess, that whole long body twitched when I yelled them at her. And I said she'd have to pay off for mixing into it because now Millikein would have to get rid of her too, what would he figure if he wanted to wipe me out and here was a chick knew all about it? And I said even if he was changing his mind, she had made him change it right back again, running off at the mouth like that.

When I ran out of breath she rolled over and sat up and pushed the hair back from her face. I think I will always remember her like that no matter what else happens. So Goddam beautiful, not only a naked chick, that's great, but she had a way of being naked like it was clothes, if you see what I mean, good ones, she wore it well like something made for her and cut so well she could forget about it, knowing it was perfect. Oh damn words anyway, that's what this whole thing is about, damn words anyway.

So I came down off it and sat next to her and told her it was a hell of a way to take good news like that, I felt the first hope I had for a whole year or more, and I know she did it for me. So we went to bed.

The next day she didn't come home from work at all.

I waited for more than an hour and suddenly got filled up with the worst wild panic I ever had in my life. I ran up the street toward Bash West and from more than a block away I could see the blinking red lights and the people. Three police cars and two hogs and an ambulance. By the time I got there they were putting her in the wagon, I just got a flash of who it was, then the doors closed and it went howling off. They said somebody attacked a girl and she killed him defending herself. There was another meat wagon came then, and what they put in it had the blanket over its face.

Who can remember all that happened next the way it happened? Running and yelling, a whole lot of stuff about money, why should you need money at a time like that? Yelling at Mrs. Walker the manager to give me twenty so I could get a cab to the hospital, somehow, not that it makes any difference, knowing that when she gave in it was for me not for the girl in five, she wasn't a nice girl anymore because of me but me, I was

still all right, what sense does that make? And then the cab that never came and when it came, standing still or running backwards all the way into Receiving Hospital, oh, forever, and then after all that running and yelling, waiting and waiting and waiting, looking at magazines I couldn't see, drinking coffee I couldn't taste out of the machine in the corridor.

Then the doctor, they must have raided a TV show for him, graying temples, tired eyes, stethoscope around his neck:

Now she wants to see you very badly, only a few minutes, can't say which way it will go, really it all depends on her, she can pull through if she wants to.

And the corner of the IC Unit, that's Intensive Care in case you didn't know, all kinds of machines standing around, three nurses running between the beds, a burned kid, an old lady with both legs raised in the air with pulleys and breathing like a power hacksaw, and in the corner, there she was. The nurses put a screen around the bed and said Call me if, and Only a few minutes, and like that.

I thought she might be knocked out, but no, she was just waiting with her eyes closed. Eye. The other one was under the bandages that covered her whole head and half her face. Otherwise she was covered with a sheet.

She said to me, "Are you all right?" That's what she said. I said, "I'm fine."

"He's dead." She closed her eye.

"That's what they tell me."

"Well then, you're all right now."

"Why did you do it?"

"He was going to kill you."

"That's not what you said."

"That's not what he said either." She could still smile a little. It wasn't the same, with the one eye. "But it's what he meant." Then she said for me to lift the sheet.

I didn't want to, but she said to. I did and said "Oh my God," and began to cry. She told me not to.

I said, "Listen, I don't care what it looks like, I am going to take care of you."

She said, "There's a whole piece cut right out of one of them. And I'm not going to get that eye back."

I said, "Oh, my God."

She looked at me for a long time with that one eye. It had that tired look. After a while she said, not mad or anything, "All my life I've known what people meant, no matter what they said, and I never met one yet that said what he meant. I don't think anyone knows how."

"That's crazy," I said. I told her I loved her. I told her I would always love her no matter what.

She looked at me for another long time, and then she said, "If I don't make it, will you take care of my dog? She's so beautiful, and she needs someone who will really take care of her."

I said of course she was going to make it.

"But in case," she said.

"I swear it."

She closed the eye. The nurse shoved the drape aside and looked in and told me to go.

She didn't make it, for some reason. Couple of days later I sold the dog and got out of town. I mean, LA really has no character.

The Patterns of Dorne

The dart was a miracle of miniaturized precision. A tiny sliver of a thing, it contained a laser generator, a proximity device, and a destruct mechanism so efficient that it would, on the instant, separate all its parts down to the molecular level. It would deliver to its target that one brief blast of intolerable heat, from close and lethal range, and would then cease to exist. A dissection of the murdered man would reveal the almost microscopic puncture burn—but then the exit wound would be almost identical and everything between them cooked into a sort of soup. There would be no marks on anything behind or around the victim; even the bright glare of almost-solar heat would be concealed within the victim's body, and as he fell, he must turn one way or the other; who could reconstruct the trajectory?

The little gun designed to throw the dart was equally a miracle—so small that it was dwarfed by the telescope mounted at its top. The propellant was a series of cryptocryogenic solenoid rings, silent and lightless, wound with tens of thousands of turns of all but invisible, superconductive wire. In the 'scope was a complete light-amplification system, with automatic range-coupling with the focus. Anything found at the intersection of the radiant crosshairs and brought into focus was going to be killed. And all of it, gun and missiles, was made of materials well below the allowable error of the finest detection devices, and demountable into small unnoticeable parts which could be, which had been, distributed in and around the neatly fitted uniform of a Senior Lieutenant in the Leader's Guard. The Leader was Dorne, and in the bright image in the 'scope was the open balcony door of Dorne's suite, and all that was lacking to complete the picture, to complete this careful plan, was the appearance in it of Dorne's famous face.

The stone room in which the Lieutenant leaned yearning into his 'scope was more suited, perhaps, to the fifteenth century than to the twenty-first, with its ironbound oaken door and its single arrow-slit window. It was tomb-dark except for the tiny spot of

light in the eyepiece, and empty except for half a lifetime's worth of hate and purpose and absolute certainty ... and now, and now it was complete; now there was a shadow-flicker in the door across the inner courtyard, now it swung back and the face on the coins, the face of stamps and placards and statues and Government edicts, the great gentle-seeming lion-maned powerful face of Dorne appeared in the crosshairs as the Leader came out exactly on schedule (of course!) for his midnight breath of air.

The Lieutenant's life and career peaked in the two tiny movements of a finger slipping through the trigger guard and a thumb on the focus rotor. The image sharpened into pore-clear detail, and, as the thumb moved to the second rotor, zoomed to fill the frame with that detested about-to-laugh countenance, its muscular cheeks, the hint of crow's feet around the wide-spaced brooding eyes. The joining of the crosshairs settled on the bridge of the Leader's nose, the finger tensed on the trigger, the image steadied—

And went out.

Went out, was blank, was gone.

There was a split second then of endless time, a black universe composed entirely of total disbelief, and then he moved his eye back, which did nothing but emphasize the blackness with the dim presence of the arrow-slit. He slid his hand away from the trigger guard and up along the 'scope to the lens, to find what was obscuring it.

It was a hand. He had time enough to touch it and know it for what it was, when something blunt-pointed struck him on the side of the Adam's apple. He fell, the gun seemingly fastened into the darkness by darkness, staying suspended while he fell away from it, fighting for two impossibilities—breath, and silence. His knees struck the stone floor, and as he bowed his head over the agony in his throat, something struck him across the exposed nape, and he went down. Pain was a brief blaze of even darker darkness, which swallowed him up.

Time skipped a beat then. He was never to remember how he had been moved from a collapsed heap on the floor under the window to a sitting position against one of the side walls. Either it was still dark, or he was blind ... No; it was just the dark, for he was aware of the dim arrow-slit. His eyes felt scalded. He had not cried for years, not since his father and two brothers had been

taken by a patrol one night, never to be seen again; he had been only a toddler then. What touched him now was all the anguished grief and loss and frustrated anger he had denied himself during these careful years; he was, for the moment, denied anything else. The one thing he did not feel was shame, and that was supplied shockingly as soft cloth touched a cheekbone, one eye, the other, wiping away tears. No one should have known he had tears. He tried to raise two angry hands and could not; tingling agony in a spot just above each collarbone told him the nerves had been expertly pinched, and he knew from experience that his arms wouldn't belong to him for a while.

Something ringed his head, settled over his brow and eyes.

He gasped. The light, as lights go, was not bright, but any light at all in this place was a dazzle. Understanding was a dazzle too—that these were blacklight goggles—a UV converter, and that with them and the invisible beam from the lamp between the lenses, he had been watched from the moment he entered the stone room in the battlement. He had been seen—photographed?—assembling the weapon and taking his aim. He had been, oh God, seen weeping, and his tears had been wiped away so that he could see through these goggles.

See what? A bright blur, a blink, a leather-backed escutcheon bearing the Leader's ubiquitous face, and on each side of it a letter, a scintillant S. Secret Service—Dorne's own legendary, mysterious secret service, above the law, outside the law; for even Dorne's law, made by Dorne, represented restrictions on Dorne, and Dorne was a man who would not be restricted.

He nodded, and the goggles were immediately snatched away. Three soft footfalls in the darkness, a breathless moment of waiting, listening, and then the heavy door was opened just far enough to build a black silhouette which slipped outside and closed the door again.

The Lieutenant gaped at where the swift vision had been, and tried not to think—thinking was too terrifying, thinking led to the certain knowledge that he was a dead man, and the even more destroying knowledge that he had been played with like a kitten and backhanded aside like an insect. So much for half a lifetime of care and passion. So instead of thinking he felt—felt the tingling above his collarbones descend to his biceps, forearms, hands, fingers, less an agony each second, until an effort of will

was rewarded by a movement in his fingers. He got his hands up and shakily rubbed them together until they belonged to him again; then he pressed himself to his feet and followed the example which had just been set him; he went to the door and held his breath, listening. Nothing. He opened the door a very small crack, peered, slipped out, closed it. No one in sight. He turned to the right and began to walk.

If he had expected the battlement to be in a state of alert or alarm, he was disappointed. It came to him, as he passed a courier, who saluted, and then a noncom, that he had seen their faces at pretty much these places time and again before; that he had slipped back again into his accustomed slot in the intricate workings of the concentric guard. Since he had come on watch tonight he had made his routine contact points each a few seconds early, until he had accumulated a shade under six minutes ahead of schedule. With these six minutes and a weapon it had taken years to design and build, he had meant to change the world. He now knew it had taken no more than that to become useless and dead, leaving the world, Dorne's world, unchanged and triumphant; for he was right on his posted schedule. He could go straight to the common room and turn over the watch to his relief, and check out, and no one would know that life and all the reasons for living had been drawn out of him, folded up, filed away—in something less than six minutes.

In the familiar common room, full of familiar faces, he checked across the columns of his report (one was headed Unusual Occurrences, one Unauthorized Personnel; he lied and wrote None, none, none all across the page; what could they do to him now, for lying?) and could appreciate the momentum of familiarity. You could be preoccupied, tired, drunk and do familiar things right. You could be dead. He knew he was watched, as he had been watched. He knew he was more than helpless—he was futile. He turned over the shift to Riggs, a career lieutenant with prominent front teeth and a giggle, and went out into the floodlit night and checked himself out through the familiar gate; and would this be the last time? Perhaps, perhaps not—so much depended on how amusing “they” found the game.

The familiar car was waiting, familiar Zein and Hallowell and Iturbi were climbing in as he reached it, and as the car slid silently along the dark streets, the talk was as usual. Nobody

noticed his silence; he was not a talkative man. Iturbi was dropped off. More silent sliding and the new familiarity of the Zein-Hallowell conversation; they always talked about Iturbi. Then they were dropped off at the Shrine of the Leader—they both lived near it, and the car slid away northward on Dorne Boulevard, with the final familiarity of his silent occupancy of the wide rear seat, and the familiar silent presence of the driver.

Northward on Dorne Boulevard? "Hey!"

The car immediately slowed and drifted to a stop against the curb. Well, at last something was different to mark the day of his death. The driver had forgotten that he lived on the South Side. He peered. It was a woman. Well, most of them were. She half-turned toward him and said, "Come up front with me."

"I'll stay where I am," he snapped. "Turn this thing around and—" He stopped, thunderstruck, for with a single casual motion the driver hooked something out of her side pocket and tossed it back into his lap. It was the eyepiece of his telescope.

There was a moment of shattering silence—no repeat request or command, no display of weapons. She simply waited. The whole dialogue was there, back and forth, back and forth—argument, resistance, threat, fear. Then he did as he must—opened his door, got out, re-entered beside her. The car started to move the instant the door clicked shut. He watched her face for a while by the wash and fade, the wash and fade of passing lights. Twenty-something, straight nose, good chin, large eyes—just another woman in uniform among the millions of the same. A thought occurred to him, a question. "Who jumped me in the battlement?"

"I did."

She drove with enormous competence and she seemed normally healthy, but she was not a large woman. Another few seconds of that silent dialogue: disbelief, could-it-be, who-else-then, prove it!—which she did in words: "You cried." Not what he wanted to hear, but proof enough.

She turned the car into a cross street and at last looked directly at him. "I don't blame you," she said. "I'd have done the same. I like you for it."

"Think of that," he said bitterly.

Ignoring this, she said, "You had no plans, had you, for afterward. After he was dead."

If she had asked him what his plans might have been, he would have refused to answer. He might even have enjoyed dying for his refusal to answer. But this was a flat statement.

“Who needs plans? Dorne’s a fool.” The heretical words felt good after all these years of reverence. “Any man’s a fool who builds his structure to a single kingpin. Snatch that out and the whole thing falls apart. It looks like strength but it isn’t.”

“And what did you think would happen when it fell apart?”

“I didn’t care. Anything would be better than a controlled population living controlled lives. Something would come up out of the ruins—maybe not as neat, efficient, maybe not as comfortable. But it would be something alive and growing, not something perfect and—well, stopped.”

She said, in a tone of perfect knowledge and certainty, “Dorne doesn’t think he will live forever. He does think his system will. He’s been ready for you for a long time.”

“For me?”

“Or someone like you. Newton’s first law operates everywhere, even in politics. ‘Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.’ If you create a society like this one, you create your revolutionaries right along with it. You know perfectly well there’s an Underground.”

“Don’t try to tie me in with that pack of creeps!” he spat.

“Oh,” she said, “I’m not. There are all kinds of revolutionaries, and the ones who make a lot of noise are the easiest to handle. They’re noticeable—that’s the thing. They can be found and picked off whenever the time is ripe. In addition, the people who follow them are usually misfits, and they don’t stop being misfits just because they follow a new leader. They couldn’t get along with the Establishment, and they can’t get along with each other. Your ‘kingpin’ principle operates there, too. Eliminate the leader and you have only a mess to clean up, not a movement to put down.”

“You have it all figured out,” he said, his bitterness increasing.

She nodded serenely. He wanted to smash his fist into her face—but not at seventy miles an hour on a winding road. Where was she taking him? The city was behind them now. She said, “There’s another kind of revolutionary who’s much more difficult to handle. He’s the kind with a personal grudge, with the intelligence to plan his strike and the ability to carry it out. He

has no partners or comrades; he can't be betrayed. The hardest thing of all to deal with is that he has a limited objective. He wants a single thing—let's say, to kill a man. He isn't building anything, he isn't saving the world, he doesn't even care if anyone ever finds out he's responsible. How can you guard against a revolutionary like that?"

"How did you?"

She smiled. "Just by knowing that he exists, that he's as inevitable as the man-the-barricades type of revolutionary hero. Once you know that, any Mark II or III computer can XT a portrait of him—who, why, how, when and where. All you have to do is sit and wait for him. He'll keep the appointment."

The wave of futility nearly drowned him. When it receded, he asked, "XT ... that's—extrapolate."

"Right. That's what it's designed for—to predict. It takes all the known factors and casts probabilities, and compares all those and selects the most probable, and does it over again and selects the most certain of those, and so on. And we aren't using a II or III—ours is a VII. It talks to all the other computers. Lieutenant—it knows."

She pulled the car off the paved road and into a barely discernible dirt track through heavy forest. She stopped talking and concentrated on driving, tooling the car through unlikely gaps between trees and rock outcrops. It came at last to a cul-de-sac between a house-sized boulder and two giant Douglas firs. She braked to a halt. She made no move to open a door, and therefore neither did he. She must have touched a control somewhere because the ground on which the car stood began silently to rotate, as on a turntable. When the car was pointed between the tree trunks, the turntable stopped and she edged the car through. Looking back, the Lieutenant could see the turntable rotating back to its previous position.

"Come in." He looked at her, and then where she pointed.

A hunter's shack on pilings, frame and tarpaper, built against a rock wall. He looked back at her. Starlight and a sliver of moon gave only a little light, but it was enough for him to see the confident way she moved as she came round the car and stood near him. She was taller than he had supposed, and she carried her hands a little away from her body, and her feet were placed so and just so. He realized there was no need to wonder if she

had a weapon. Her hands were weapons—she was a weapon. And for all he knew she might have had a gun as well. He nodded and led the way to the shack. At her gesture he pushed the door open and went in. She closed the door and a light sprang out from her hand. He saw a bunk, an old stove, rubble on the floor, some firewood. She kicked at the firewood and the wall behind it rolled massively upward, revealing a corridor slanting downward into the hillside.

The Lieutenant paused right there and looked back past her at the flimsy barrier of the shack wall, and then at her. How he telegraphed what flicked through his mind, he did not know. Did he tense, narrow his eyes, flex his hands, set his feet? He almost moved, but she said quietly, “Don’t.”

And caught, he had to shake a rueful head and relax. He asked a straight question, gesturing at the corridor. “If I walk down there, will I ever come out alive?” And she gave him what sounded like a straight answer: “That is entirely up to you.” She made an ‘after you’ gesture, and he sighed and went down the corridor; thinking several things on several levels: That is one hell of a lot of woman, and What’s she got that’s so special? because he had seen many a prettier girl, some who seemed more intelligent, a whole lot that were more fun.... And under it all, They’ve caught me and I am going to die in this place. She passed him after the turn at the bottom of the ramp, looking up into his face, and opened a door. They went in.

Torture chamber? Mad scientist’s lair, with rock walls, steaming retorts, and traveling arcs zit-zitting? Secret martial court, complete with granite-faced officers and an empty prisoner’s dock waiting just for him? None of this ... a homey living room. Carpet worn but not shabby, a little rip in a lampshade. Big sofa, two big chairs, three well-chosen small ones and a matching table, a large desk cater-cornered. Home, not office or shop. A cheerful little man in his fifties sprang up and came around the desk with his hand out. “Lieutenant! I’ve been looking forward to this.”

He took the hand by sheer reflex, and the little man, talking warmly, made a tiller of it and steered him over to one of the big chairs. He had his choice of sitting in it or falling into it; he sat, dumbfounded. “Dr. McHenry ...!” Had this been the moment for small witticism, he might have added “... I presume.” He could

presume; this was one of the world's most famous faces, along with—oh my Lord, she was here too, Rachel Heinz McHenry; the Sunday-supplement cliché for this couple was "Twenty-first Century Curies." She was a biochemist, if you like understatements, and her husband was the greatest living computer theorist, which means mathematics, logic, language, cybernetics, philosophy, electronics, and a number of sidelines. He never got the chance to get to his feet to shake Rachel McHenry's hand; she was there to give it to him before he could even try, and was begging him to accept coffee. He refused, not because he didn't want it but because it was a little like having the Pope scramble you some eggs. The whole thing was watched in (he thought) an amused fashion by the uniformed girl, who seemed quite at home here, though he found himself wishing she would take off the Dorne hat, with its shiny bill and the foreign-legion curtain around the back. The Dorne short-winged cape suited her; the hat did not.

Dr. McHenry went back to his desk chair and sat down. He opened the flat center drawer and took out a yellow sheet and laid it down and said, "I'm going to come straight to the point, Lieutenant. Tonight you tried to kill Leader Dorne. I'd like to know how long you planned this."

Suddenly the little dash of pleased surprise evaporated, and this was a grim business again. "You know already. I understand you have access to a Mark VII XT."

"He designed it," snapped the girl—perhaps a little defensively. Dr. McHenry held up pacifying hands to both of them. "Please," he said. "You're not being grilled, Lieutenant. Call it a rhetorical question. I was leading up to something else. You don't have to answer."

"In that case," said the Lieutenant, "I'll answer it. I think I began planning it the day my father and two brothers didn't come back after some soldiers dropped by one midnight. I was thirteen at the time; I'm twenty-seven now. There isn't anything I've done that wasn't part of it—getting into the Service, qualifying for the Concentric Guard—everything. I have never married. I never learned to dance. Tonight it all came to a peak and you took it away from me. Now you know what I am and what I've done and how I feel."

Dr. McHenry leaned back in his chair and delivered an

unprofessorial “Wow.” His wife—it was almost ludicrous—said with what sounded like genuine concern, “You’re sure I can’t get you something?” The girl looked very sober. Dr. McHenry slid the drawer open and took out another yellow sheet. He glanced at it and said, “How much do you know about Leader Dorne? I mean who his folks were, how he grew up, all the things that made him what he is?”

“I’ve read the school books. Who hasn’t? Visions as a child, flabbergasting his teachers, arguing down the professors when he was twelve—all that. I never bothered much with it. All I cared about was him now—his habits, his routines, where I could get at him.”

“Then let me tell you some things you may not know.

“Dorne was born a Jew. His parents weren’t Jewish; they converted just before he was born. They were hardshell Fundamentalists who wanted to go all the way into the Old Testament because they found the new one not orthodox enough for them. When Dorne got old enough to think for himself he shucked all that and became a Christian. Somewhere in his teens he was a Buddhist for a while, but that didn’t last; there’s not much in real Buddhism for a man who wants personal power. After that he turned away from religion altogether and got involved with communism. Very involved. It didn’t take him long to become part of the inner circle.

“That lasted for quite a few years, and then the currents began to flow in the other direction. Dorne joined the opposition, turned in a lot of his friends, and before long was masterminding the so-called Swing to the Right of the 1990s. It wasn’t a big step to turn that into what we have today.”

“And we’ll have it forever, thanks to you and your Mark VII.”

Again McHenry held up the pacifying hand. “It’s very important—vital—for you to understand what we’re trying to tell you. Just remember what I’ve said about the Leader. I want you to notice especially the timing of the changes he went through. At first it was a matter of weeks, then months, then years.”

“And now,” said the Lieutenant glumly, “there’ll never be another. He’s too old to change.”

“Very good. Very good,” said Dr. McHenry with surprising warmth. “The very point I wanted to get across. Now: Rachel.”

She came closer and perched on the arm of one of the big

chairs; she looked like a plump bird. He was marveling again at the very idea that this legendary figure should think of making coffee for him when she dropped her bomb: "Lieutenant, I've found out how to make a man immortal." She paused. "Truly. Barring accident, a man can live forever."

The Lieutenant closed his eyes carefully and opened them again to see again, really believe this plump friendly little lady who was saying things about DNA and RNA molecules. "Hard to do, mind you, but easy to understand. The pattern, the blueprint of the whole human being is in every single cell of his body. Now in a newborn baby, the patterns are sharp and clear, but as we grow older the lines of the blueprint get blurred as the cells are replaced. It's just the same thing as making copies of a tape. You can get beautiful copies with good equipment, but no matter how good it is, when you have to make copies from copies, you lose a little each time. And that's all aging is.

"But if you have the original tape, and make each copy from that one, you can get a great number of almost perfect copies. Likewise if you have a tissue sample of a newborn baby, and keep it for, say, forty years, you can use it as a master to clean up the blurred lines in that same person's DNA molecules. It's done through the lymph system—flooding the tissues ... Oh, but never mind that, we don't have to get technical. Will you believe me if I say we can do it?"

"I'll believe you." He had to say it.

McHenry opened his drawer again and took out a yellow sheet. This was beginning to irritate the Lieutenant. Dr. McHenry beckoned the girl, who crossed to him, glanced at the paper, and then came to the Lieutenant. She sank to her knees before him, took both his hands, looked deep into his eyes. Holding him so—and her eyes seemed to be doing most of the holding—she pressed his hands down on the arms of his chair. There was a faint click and he looked down to find his wrists, his forearms and his thighs encircled by bands of silvery-gray mesh which flicked up and around and down into the chair again. "It's all right," the girl said before he could speak, could shout. "Try to relax, now." She stood up, moved away.

The Lieutenant gazed disgustedly down at his trapped limbs. "And now it begins, I suppose." He hoped his tone of disgust covered all of his terror.

"Nothing begins," said Dr. McHenry. "It's just time to tell you something, and we don't want you to get hurt." He looked at his wife, who said quietly, "We have a preserved sample of Leader Dorne's tissue, taken when he was only eight days old. We've been able to reconstitute the DNA from it, and prepare enough synthetic DNA to flood his whole body. We are going to make him into a perfectly self-perpetuating organism. We will make him immortal."

The Lieutenant yelled then, and leapt upward against the straps. And again. And again. He began to shout something with such force that the words could not be understood. Saliva flew; he bit his tongue; blood flew. The women ran to him, saying soothing nonsense words as to a hurt child, wiping his wet and bloody mouth. Rachel McHenry bathed his temples and eyelids with a tissue drenched in something cool and medicinal. At last he was calm enough to be able to use words, though he still shouted. "Don't you see what you've done? You've killed us all, and all the people to come. Oh, the armies and factories and farms will keep on going, and all the people in them, but they'll be dead, all mankind will be dead because it can't grow, it can't change! Why didn't you leave me alone? Why didn't you let me kill him?" He sobbed; then he shouted again: "What's in it for you? Haven't you got enough medals and prizes already? What can Dorne do for you?" After that he began to curse. They let him. Dr. McHenry took another yellow sheet out of the drawer. When he looked at it, he smiled. He handed it to the girl, and the expressions which chased themselves over her face were a sight to see—surprise, laughter, and then an exquisite wave of pink. She returned to the chair and knelt before the prisoner, waiting. When he began to run down, she asked him gently, "Will you listen to me?" She had to repeat it before he could hear her; he slumped back and glared at her redly. She said patiently, "If I let you go, will you listen to me?"

Still he stared, and she sighed and took from a pocket the leather-mounted I.D. she had displayed in the stone room the profile of the Leader flanked by the two S's. "This isn't a real one. We made it. Don't you see, we're not on Dorne's side—we're on yours. You and I, all of us here—we want the same thing; we want an end to what Dorne has built." She threw the I.D. back over her shoulder, a used-up thing. He followed it with his eyes,

and then looked angrily at her again. "Why should I believe you?"

"Why did you believe I was in the SS? Just because I showed you that? What was I to do—explain all this to you, in the state you were in? Suppose I had—how far could I have gotten marching you out at gunpoint? They'd have caught us both, for sure. No, you had to leave by yourself, certain you were watched. The only thing that could make you do that was to believe the SS was on to you. Don't you see—I had to do it this way?" She was pleading with him, and while fury and amazement circled around his confused mind, she reached up and removed the Dorne hat, and did something with pins, clips.... Her hair cascaded down around her shoulders and back and breasts, such masses of red-gold hair as he had seldom seen, never touched—never in his stark, unswerving, purposeful life. "May I let you go now? Will you listen? Will you please listen?"

He nodded. Instantly she touched a control in the chair arm, and the restraints flickered out of sight. Rachel McHenry said, "I could maybe make you that cup of coffee now?" and somehow they all laughed—not heartily, just a little, but it cleared the air.

McHenry came round his desk and crossed to the chair where the girl still knelt, like a nymph under a waterfall, a red-gold light-fall. He carried one of his yellow papers with him. He said, "Think, now—think hard. Remember what I told you about Dorne's patterns. He moved from religion to religion, then into politics, from one kind to another. He was looking for answers, he was looking for some law, some system that would be right for him, and finally, when he couldn't find one, he made one.

"But it is the pattern of that man to change. True, the changes came more and more slowly as he grew older, and true, too, that with a normal lifetime he would die before the next change could come. If he dies now, there will be no change. He has computers too, you know—and he has programmed them. He will no longer be kingpin—his computer will run the whole structure, and then there will be death for us all. Life itself is growth and change, and a society which does not grow and change is dead, and all the people in it, as you yourself said.

"Now we have given Dorne unlimited life, and because he is what he is, he will change this thing. Ultimately he will because he must—because he is Dorne and that is his pattern. Also, he has

more power to bring about the changes than anyone else.

"All this will happen if he is immortal. He can't be immortal as long as you are alive and free and determined to kill him. Can you understand me?"

The Lieutenant looked from one to another of them, and his eyes came to rest on the girl's hair. Rachel McHenry murmured, "You have to find something else to live for."

The young man rose from his big chair and moved slowly toward the girl. Almost like a sleepwalker he raised his hand and gently touched her hair. The hand dropped away. He shook himself, then said to Rachel, "Maybe I could. Maybe I could, if..."

No one finished the sentence for him, but the girl smiled.

The Lieutenant put his hands to his face for a moment, then took them down, and now he could smile too, a little. "You've batted me around like a ping-pong ball," he said a little shakily. "I've never felt so helpless in all my life. You people are out of my league."

"No we're not." Dr. McHenry smiled. "But our friend in the corner is." He pointed at the battered desk—and why should a Mark VII XT not look like a battered desk? "Don't give us more credit than we deserve. Look at this."

Words were typed on the yellow sheet: If killing Dorne is a conviction, keep him. If an obsession—kill him.

"Convictions yield to reason," McHenry said gently. "Obsessions don't. It was a close thing."

The Lieutenant looked at that mass of red-gold and said, "Not really." Nobody ever told him that the VII had instructed her to take it down, that it had followed every word spoken in that room. Nobody ever told him, either, because it never occurred to him to ask, why a pair of Fundamentalist parents would preserve every scrap of flesh cut away from themselves or their child; such folk believe they will be reassembled on Judgment day, actually and literally.

So it was by this means that Mankind overpowered Death and conquered Time, and took the stars.

Crate

We had to bury the pilot and Mr. Petrilli and the Stein kid, and by the time we were done with that we had to bury Rodney. It was a hell of a job for a bunch of kids but Miss Morin made us. The pilot had no face and not much head and Mr. Petrilli's chest was all squashed and the Stein kid didn't seem to have a mark on him, I guess he died of scare before the boat hit. Rodney screamed until Miss Morin gave him that stuff. After that he just lay there until he died. Also Miss Morin was hurt but nobody knew it at the time. She was up and around before anybody, after the crash, telling everybody what to do. She was always a great one for that. You want to be a probation officer, you be like that. Miss Morin, she was a probation officer before she was born, I bet when she was born she had that same set of lines around her mouth old maids get from sucking their own mouth instead of someone else's.

After we planted the people we wanted to take it easy but she told off Fatty and Pam to drag out some food and set it up while Tommy and Hal and Flip had to get into the hold and bring out a crate. There was a lot of crates in there and most of them was triangles, full of panels for building dome houses, but it wasn't just any crate she wanted, it was one special one. She give Tommy a paper with the special numbers wrote on it big, and they had to slide half a hundred crates in and out to look before they found the right one. They got it out and it was hard, with the ship tipped over that way and Flip getting under foot all the time. He was nine. Tom was fifteen, big. Hal was fourteen but not much bigger than Flip. The crate weighed about a hundred pounds.

We sat on the ground outside and ate except Miss Morin.

She sat on the crate. That's the way she was, she always stood or sat a little higher than everyone else, one of her tricks. She was full of tricks. She was the most iron-handed hardmouthing cold-blooded old bitch ever lived. She was always around. She told us what to do and she was around to see it got done. There was

other probation officers back on Earth had groups like us, overflow kids that didn't fit in nowhere and got into trouble and they shipped them off to frontier planets where they could fight cold and heat and animals instead of other people and the "Great As Is" (well that was what they said they was doing, we always thought they was just finding some edge to dump us off); anyway, other probation officers made up stuff for their kids to do and then went off on their own and when they came back, if it wasn't done they would put one or another of the kids in Detention or all of them. Miss Morin never did that, she was always around, she never went off on her own business, she had no business but us. She didn't use Detention, she didn't need it, she was a walking Detention all by herself. Also the other Probation Officers rode herd on a group until they was shipped out and then got themselves another bunch. Not Miss Morin. When the day came for us to go, there she was, she'd fixed it to come along too. Nobody knew for sure what it would be like Outside, the only thing to look forward to was being away from your PO, and look at this, we had our PO right along with us.

So while we ate she made this speech. She said what we already knew, that there wasn't no place for kids like us on Earth, we'd all had our chance to shape up and we didn't, we were lucky to live in a time when there was frontier worlds where there could be a place for us, because in earlier times there wasn't no place and we would of been calmed down by wiping out part of our brain and be fit to push a mop for life, and in a earlier time still we would of spent most of our time in like Detention but much worse, with bars on the windows. But now there was the Jump Drive and a way of space-bending, like if you put two dots on a paper a long way apart and then bend the paper so the dots are together, you could jump from one to the other without hardly moving, and in no time. So with the Jump Drive there was ships going to thirty or more brand-new worlds and more found all the time, with plenty of room for overflow people and plenty of work and room for the likes of us that was so much trouble. This here was one of the new worlds, it was called Barrault and it was a dangerous place but it could be a good one if we got it tamed down. And we did not have to do it ourself, there was already a town called Cap Sidney.

Miss Morin went on to tell us more we already knew, like our

boat crashed. Jump Drive ships don't land no place, boats off them do. So when they turned our boat loose it come into Real Space in the middle of a magnetic storm and nothing worked right. The pilot done the best he could but without radio or radar or ground control he couldn't do much. So he was dead and Mr. Petrilli and two of the kids, and that left Miss Morin and the five of us. The ship wouldn't know we crashed, you don't contact Jump Ships from Real Space because they ain't in it. Also they wouldn't know we'd crashed at Cap Sidney neither, they had no way of knowing when a boat would come unless they got told by the boat, which we didn't do without no radio because of that storm.

So now Miss Morin come to the point which was what we had to do next. We had to eat all we could and sleep a lot and then in the morning start out for Cap Sidney. There would not be nobody looking for us and there was no sense hanging around by the wreck, it did not carry no more food and water than it needed for a few orbits, and more than half of that was lost in the crash.

She told us how to get to Cap Sidney. Go straight east—that meant walk into the sun all morning and keep the sun behind us all afternoon. Then we would come to a river, and we had to follow it downstream till we come to Cap Sidney. She made it sound real easy and I don't know if any of us listened real hard.

But then she come to the part about the crate, and we listened to that all right, because she got off it and kneeled down on the ground and made her voice kind of whispery and talked about that crate as if it was full of the greatest treasure in all the world, any world. She said, "Back on Earth not one of you had a chance of growing up to be anything or have anything. Out here you have. Now, you weren't to know this, but because of the crash, I'll tell you. This crate is the greatest treasure known to man, but it has to be taken to the Preceptor at Cap Sidney before you can get your share. Don't open it—you would not understand what is in it if you did. And I want you to understand what I'm saying—this treasure is not for me or for the colony, it's for you. It's yours and nobody will cheat you out of it and nobody can take it away from you. But you have to get it to the Preceptor."

I guess it was about this time we began to realize that Miss Morin wasn't planning to go along with us. Nobody liked the old razor-back but the idea of getting away from her was a little bit

spooky. We just weren't used to it. We all got real quiet. Then she started to cough. She used to cough once in a while like that. She didn't make almost no noise at all because she held a big handkerchief up tight against her nose and mouth, but it was like she was being hit by big fists the way it shook her. We just sat and waited it out like we always did. It lasted longer than usual and for a time she kneeled there with her head on the crate and the cloth up against her mouth. Nobody made a move to touch her. You did not touch Miss Morin. When she got up she stood up straight as ever. Pam saw something she did not tell about until later. Nobody else saw it.

Then Miss Morin gave orders about getting the crate ready to carry, fixing a handle on each corner and screwing in eyebolts around the edge so we could lash our food and water on the top. Then she told Pam to come with her and went and climbed back into the busted tipped-over ship. The rest of us went on working on the crate. After a time Pam came back looking real quiet and stiff and said for Flip to go see her. Flip come back after a while and he looked scared. He said for Fatty to go in. Well, one at a time we went in to see Miss Morin, all five of us. She had something special to say to each one of us and said it was private, so let's keep it that way for now. We turned in soon as it was dark, sleeping outdoors near the crate. In the morning Miss Morin was dead. We could see her in there through the glass port in the door, but the door was locked from the inside. Her eyes was open and she'd throwed up a lot of blood. I bet she tried hard not to do that but she did anyway. Maybe we would have buried her too but like I said, she locked herself in and there wasn't nothing to do but get going. Tommy was the biggest, he was fifteen, and when he said let's go, we went. Tommy and Hal and Fatty took the three handles and Pam and Flip walked along ahead. It wasn't too long before Fatty begun to whine about how heavy the crate was, and Pam took over. Fatty kept on whining but not so loud. Flip was all over the place, ahead, behind, all over; well, Flip was only nine. He told what Miss Morin had said to him private. It was "Always ask somebody first."

It did not get too hot that first day although the air was very dry. We could look back and see the boat for a long time. It was plains country covered mostly with a brown weed. We seen like a mouse with six legs and a whole bunch of bugs that run sideways

like crabs and one time a bunch of big knob-headed birds like ostriches away off, watching us. After a time we couldn't see the boat no more, it just went out of sight in that rolling country, you'd think it sank. We had to yell at Fatty to take over from Pam. Pam would not complain but she got tired easier than the others. Pam was fourteen but not very big. We wanted to stop but Tommy made us keep dragging until the sun was right overhead and then we lay up until we could be sure which way it was setting, so we'd know which way to go. We ate some and drank a little of the water, Tommy wouldn't let us have but a little, and we lay around in the shade and talked a little, some about Miss Morin. A funny thing happened about that:

Somebody said something about what a ironbound bitch she was, she wouldn't give you a cup of water if you was drowning, if she had a kind word for anybody it would choke her, and the next thing you know Flip was screaming at us. Flip! Flip was a fuzzyheaded little nine-year-old, I guess some people would say he was kind of cute, but mostly he was underfoot and asking questions and running when it was easier to walk, make you tired just looking at him. Well you know how little kids are. Anyway here he was yelling at us that Miss Morin was not either a ironbound bitch, we was all a bunch of ironbound bitches and we stunk too. I mean he was mad and crying. After a time he was sad and crying, which is a lot different, and he told us that one time at the Probation Center he got up tight and tried to run away, he couldn't've been no more than seven. It was at night and nobody could get through the force-fences, but he didn't know that and he tried for a long time and then it got cold and he flopped down by one of the fence generators. And who should come along but Miss Morin, she must've been looking for him half the night, and she did not say nothing but sat down beside him, and he climbed up into her lap and went to sleep and she held him like that until morning and took him back and never gave him no Detention. We listened to him bug-eyed because we could not believe Miss Morin would do such a thing but we could not disbelieve Flip telling about it crying.

Soon as the shadows started pointing east we got ourselves together and started east too. Fatty got to whining worse than ever and we let Flip help on that corner. After the third time Flip stepped on Fatty's feet, Fatty was ready to kill him and chased

him away and then couldn't whine so much.

It was getting more hilly and we come over the top of a rise and down in a little valley it looked like somebody had built something. I mean there was five or six things standing up out of the ground, like if you have a oval bowl and cut it in two crosswise and stand it up on the cut. A couple were two or three feet tall and the others as tall as a man and then there was one really big one, I mean twelve foot or more. Flip, he went bouncing down the slope to see what they were, he had no more sense than a puppy dog. As we worked our way down the hill we could see that in front of each of the half-oval things there was a patch of bare purplish rock, or it looked like rock, dished down with kind of a wet mud in it, and back at the bottom of the tall thing, half sunk in the slime, a thing almost as big as your head, red and green and a shivery sort of yellow. We thought at first it was some kind of animal trapped or tied in there, because when we came up closer it began to wobble and spin and wiggle and swell up and all. Also there was a very sweet sticky smell that came up. Flip I guess wanted a closer look at that ball-thing inside, and in he went to look at it close or poke at it. Soon as he touched it the whole tall half-oval, like on a hinge, slammed down like a big mouth closing. My God I could feel the ground shake. Fatty started to scream and scream. We dropped the crate and ran over there. The big oval thing lay flat down now, it was covered with brown bark and it was made of hard wood. Flip's hand and forearm stuck out from one side. Tommy hit Fatty to stop the screaming and tried to get his fingers in the crack and lift, and Hal grabbed Flip's wrist and tried to pull him out. Tommy couldn't budge the thing, and the hand and forearm up to the elbow came off, chomped right in two. Fatty started to scream again and Hal fell down on his back and dropped the arm and looked at it and throwed up.

However we all were at first, it turned into a big mad. We jumped and kicked at that big closed thing, laying there like a great big wooden clam. We couldn't barely dent it. Then somebody thought of the bag of firemakers we had with us, discs about as big as your hand, you pull out the string and it begins to burn. Hal pulled the string on one and throwed it into one of the other clam-things, and it came down whomp! shaking the ground, and after a time smoke come out all around the edge. So we

killed them all with the firemakers. You'd've thought we was all crazy the way we laughed. You would have to be there, be us, before you could understand how it was we could laugh at all that. We built a fire on the big closed one that got Flip, but it kept going out. I don't think we really hurt that one none.

We buried the arm and said the same words we said over the pilot and Mr. Petrilli and the Stein kid and Rodney, and picked up the crate and moved on.

We got into foothills before dark and found a place against a wall of rock and built a fire and ate and drank some more of our water. We got out the sleeping bags, they didn't weigh but a few ounces each but once they was inflated they were snug. Pam got into hers and Tommy went to get in with her, and before you know it Hal caught him by the shoulder and snatched him backwards and bowled him right over.

Tommy was big and broad and had shiny teeth, and Hal couldn't never have knocked him down if he expected it but he didn't. It could be Hal was even more surprised than Tommy because he did not try to stomp him or anything. Tommy rolled right on over and come up on his feet and dived on Hal and they went round and round. Hal got in a couple of real good ones because he was so mad but it wasn't no contest. Tommy beat the hell out of him and stood back and let him get up, and when Hal went for him again he beat the hell out of him again. So Hal quit. Tommy went back to Pam.

Pam said no, get away, and called to Hal. She said, "Hal, you're going to sleep with me." Tommy let out a roar at that and wanted to know why, and Pam told him straight. She said, "Miss Morin said if anybody got to fighting over me I was to sleep with the loser. Now you both think about that the next time you want to fight." And she held open the sleeping bag until Hal got through the thing of not believing his ears and the thing of creeping past Tommy trying to be sure he wouldn't hit him again anyway and at last got in. Tommy just stood there shaking his head and after Hal was in with Pam he went and got his own bag and got in it and turned his face to the rock wall.

Much later in the night when the fire had burned down real low and it was quiet, Tommy woke up. Pam was slipping into his sleeping bag. She whispered, "Well, she didn't say I couldn't sleep with the winner too." But would you believe, Tommy kicked her

out.

The next day was the thirsty day, and it was this close to being the last day alive for Fatty. The way Tommy and Hal looked at each other from time to time you would think there was going to be a murder. Also Tommy was plenty mad at Pam and Pam was still stung at getting kicked out like that, I mean, no woman likes to get turned down like that. In the middle of all this there's Fatty, whose feet hurt, who is thirsty, who wants to know how much longer this trip is going to take, and most of all, over and over and over again, "Why do we have to carry this thing?"

It got so that the big reason for carrying the crate was to bug Fatty. That whine was enough, after a while, to make the rest of us join forces and forget what we had going against each other.

We climbed. I don't know what we would of done if it was overcast. We were going west, but as the mountain grew steeper and rougher we had to go north for miles, sometimes, and then cut back again to go around. Once we spent three hours lowering ourselves into a canyon that seemed to turn west and climb again to a pass high to the south, only to find it was a dead end after a turn at the bottom, and it took us seven hours to haul ourselves and the crate back out again, right back to where we had started. We camped there too, and there wasn't but a splash of water left. Aside from being mad, Pam and Fatty were holding out pretty well, and of course Tommy was a bull, but Hal wasn't making it. He didn't say anything, but the way he slumped down when we stopped to rest, and the way he kept on panting for breath long after the rest of us were cooled down and ready to go, it worried us. Really the reason we camped where we did was that Hal passed out. I mean he just buckled at the knees and went down. Pam saw his head bump, bounce a little on the rock. She dropped her corner of the crate and went to him and sat him up, leaning against her, and wiped his face with her sleeve. He wouldn't open his eyes and when she opened one for him you couldn't see anything but the white. Without saying anything Tommy came around with the canteen and measured out a share of water and fed it to him. It brought him around, and then right away he fell into a normal sleep, and we had to wake him up to eat.

That was the cold night. We fused three bags and all slept together or we couldn't've made it. Never be thirsty and cold at the same time. That is not good.

In the morning, first thing, Tommy gave Hal another drink, and three hours later, when we were near the peak, he gave him more. It was Fatty who realized what was going on. Maybe Fatty was looking for something more to whine about, I don't know. By now Pam was mostly handling the point and Fatty was full time on the left corner. Tommy held the right-side handle of the crate with one hand and kept his other arm around Hal, who could only stumble along glassy-eyed. Fatty quit complaining and took to watching Tommy all the time.

We reached the high pass, and down there, way down, we saw the river. Funny, how the sight of it made the little swallow of water that Tommy doled out seem like so much less. But we all of us knew that it wasn't the time to gulp it down. Fatty and Pam and Hal each got their share, and we went on, and not once until after the rain did Fatty whine.

And oh it rained, it came up like artillery, with no more warning than ten minutes of mugginess. Next thing you know we were bracing ourselves against the rocks and hanging on to the crate with hands, feet and teeth. The torrents of water roared and sprayed all around us, first out of the sky lashed by solid slamming fists of wind, and then from uphill as the water found its way around the crags and down the fissures, smashing into boulders and throwing spray high in the air. Just as quickly, the wet shrapnel from the sky quit, but the water on the mountain went on and on, hissing and roaring and shining in the sun. And as soon as he dared take his hands off the crate, there was Tommy with the canteen, catching a little waterspout with it, holding it steady until it glugged full and spit out and overflowed. Then he very carefully screwed on the cap, and turned to the spout off the rock, still running.

Fatty scrambled over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Take it very easy at first, Tommy." And winked.

Tommy said, "You don't miss a thing, do you, Fatty?" He got a mouthful of water from the rock and swished it around and spit it out before he sipped a little. Pam wanted to know what the talk was about. Hal came around the rock dripping all over and looking better than he had in two days. Tommy said to shut up. Fatty grinned and said no. "You know what he's been doing? Giving his own water ration to Hal." Tommy said again to shut up. Hal said, "Jesus, Tommy." Pam looked at Tommy like ... like

the way guys wish girls would look.

Tommy sounded a little sore when he said, "It wasn't me, damn yez all. Miss Morin, she told me to." He let that soak in. "She must've known what would happen. Or maybe she just knew ... me. She said, if you come to hate somebody, do him a favor. A big one. That's why I gave Hal the water." He looked at Hal, and said, kind of surprised, "I don't hate you no more. How about that."

I think we could of said the thing about Miss Morin, how it really was with her, right then, except for what happened. Maybe even that's what Pam was going to say, because she jumped up and kind of, you know, capered, like it was more than she could hold, and said, "Listen, Miss Morin was—" and then she was gone, just—gone, because, what with that bash of rain and all, the mountain was different, there was an edge that was closer, and I guess slippery too. All three of us were side by side on our bellies yelling something I can't even spell, and looking down at Pam falling away, getting smaller and smaller, and hitting a cliff face and bouncing far out and down and smaller still and landing on a saddleback and sliding, and then there wasn't any Pam any more. Rocks and some mud, and then more rocks and a crazy gout of dry dust, uncovered by the rock-fall, shot out of the cliff and went down after her, smoky and pretty in the new washed sunlight.

From belly-down, Hal bounced up on all fours, maybe ready to go after Pam. Not to get her, not to save her, just to be where she was. He was immediately surrounded by Fatty, arms, legs, hands, feet. Tommy was a little slower but much more effective. He pulled them both back from the edge. He was crying. Fatty was crying too, but what else? Tommy crying the way he did, it was awful.

We got the crate into Cap Sidney. I don't know how. I do know how. It was Fatty. Well, it was really Miss Morin. Here's what I mean. That Miss Morin, she knew us all, and what she cared the most about was that whatever was weakest in each of us would have a prop under it when the load got big. The only one it didn't work on was Flip, well hell, little kids, they forget. Hal told us what her private word was to him. She told him "Hold out for the biggest reward—the one you'll live with." Fatty explained that to

him all the way. Fatty told him going after Pam, now or later, wasn't anything he could live with. He didn't know what he wanted to live with after Pam went, but Miss Morin said to live with something—to live.

It was Fatty, too, who said to Tommy that Miss Morin wanted that crate to get to Cap Sidney. He only had to be told that once.

It worked, and seeing it work made it all come crashing through to Fatty. What Miss Morin had said to Fatty was, "When it all comes apart, you put it together." Seeing it work changed Fatty from a kid to a girl. She was only twelve. Later on it would change her to a woman.

It took eight days to get down the mountain and across the river and to Cap Sidney, and it took eight hours for the Preceptor to convince us that what was in the crate was nothing—nothing but triangular insulating boards for a geodesic dome, and they had plenty of them already and could get the rest from the boat now they knew it was there. We were pretty mad at first. It almost came all apart again, we were so mad. And then Fatty put it together again for us. She said the one thing that made all the difference to us, because you got to remember who we were, the overflow, the can't-fit, the unwanted.

She said, "How many times would we have fell apart without that crate to carry? How far would we have got without we stuck by it and taken care of each other? The treasure she promised us if we got it through was just what she said it was—the greatest treasure known to man—to be alive. The treasure wasn't in the box, it was bringin' the box." Then she said it, Fatty did, she said what made the big difference to all of us forever and ever afterward; she said:

"That Miss Morin, she loved us. She really and truly loved us."

Suicide

Boyle ... jumped. He did it. He really and truly did it.

They say that when the end comes, no matter how swiftly, there's time enough for your whole life to pass before your eyes. That's not strictly true; it would take a real lifetime to do that, but there is time enough for a hell of a lot. However, Boyle discovered, as others had before him, that you get a lot of pictures, all out of order—yes, and sounds, too, voices speaking a word or two, laughing, a shout that reaches you at last from years away and means what the shouter meant instead of what you've always thought it meant. In such a moment everything makes sense. Some of the images and noises are apparently trivial: Aunt Edith saying "Please pass the salt" and how Hank always used to have one sock up and one down while they were little kids, and things like that.

Then there are the replays of things you know aren't trivial and never were, like the time you had to go to Scranton and Kay said suddenly "Don't go. Please don't go," and you knew damn well she was going to sleep with somebody that night and wanted you out of the way and yet she said that, and you—you went to Scranton anyway. And Kreiger saying, "Boyle, you know you'd be happier in some other line," which meant Out, never mind those years and all that sweat and loyalty and the pipedreams of the big desk with the opaline letters on a chock facing the door.

He jumped.

He jumped, and sure there was terror, there always is when you're falling, there often is when it's dark. And sure there was regret, and if-only-I-had-it-all-to-do-over-again. He had expected, and he got, a couple of brand new ideas to cure it all. Just walk up to him and say ... just show her once and for all that he ... take a loan on ... a lot of stuff like that; and under and around it all, a deep glee: I made it. Boyle did not fail. I said I would do it and I did. That ought to prove something to the whole sonabitchin bunch of them.

That's about as far as he got before something in the dark took

his foot and turned him. The wind was different as it whirled past his face and he found himself looking incredulously past his feet at the stars, with the great bulk of the cliff face blotting out a third of the sky. Then the lights (ten thousand lights in the valley below over his head, a million lights in the sky under his feet) were eclipsed by ten million more inside his head as he got a shower of cruel thumps and a hundred long numb scrapes that would be agony if he lived long enough for the shock to wear off, but he wouldn't.

And the lights went out.

"Don't go. Please don't go." The voice was soft and quite clear and close. He opened his eyes and could see the silhouette of her head as she bent close. He could even feel the stirring of the hairs over his temple stir to her breath. He blinked once and it wasn't her head or anyone's head, it was the bulk of the mountain against the sky. For a foolish flash he thought he might still be in midair, falling, but a single twitch of his cheek told him he was not. Falling through the unresisting air you do not feel pebbles and dirt ground into your flayed check. He shook his head to clear it and his whole body moved, slid. It was only a few inches, but it was enough to pack dirt and rubble into his collar and send a shocking stab of pain from somewhere low on his right leg right up through his body. Or maybe it was down. Up was still down for him. Cautiously he looked over his head and saw lights ... stars? No, for they were in rows and patterns. They were the same as the lights on the valley floor. They were the lights of the valley floor.

He was lying on a spur of the mountain, on his back and head down, and the ground under him was tilted like a pitched roof. He looked quickly past his feet and there were the stars—and again he slid an inch or two. He suddenly and appallingly realized that if he twitched like that once or twice more, if he slid just far enough, fast enough so he did not stop, he was going to go right over that ragged edge down there.

Slowly and very carefully he studied out where his hands were. One was on the ground at his side, the other across his stomach. He raised this one and put it to the ground too. The left hand could find only loose pebbles and earth which slipped up (down) past him hopping and hissing when he moved his fingers, and

bounded away into black space somewhere past his head. Not very far either. The right hand rested on what seemed like a more solid piece of rock. Carefully, not daring to turn his head to look, knowing it was too dark to see anyway, he explored it with his fingertips.

There was an edge there ... more—it was a crack an inch wide. He could not discover how long it was nor how deep. He curled his fingers into it and it felt wonderful. He stopped moving for a time and indulged himself in the joy of feeling it. He had known this feeling once before when he had bought his first new car. This is mine, this belongs to me. He let his fingertips creep in and slide out again, very much the way he had let his proud hands stray over the new-smelling upholstery and dashboard. How wonderful to own a crack in a rock.

He tried to hook his heels into something and edge himself uphill a bit, but there was nothing but loose dirt and pebbles up there and an explosion of pain from his right leg. And his whole body told him it was about to slip again toward that edge, down (up) there past his head.

He got his right fingers as deep as they would go into the crack, and stopped to think. The fear began then, and it wouldn't let him think. It rose and flooded over him and left him weak, with puddles of it here and there over his whole soul like tidal pools. He knew there would be other waves of it, too. Fear numbs your brain, fear can weaken, can paralyze your fingers, can draw them out of that precious crack in the rocks which is the only possession left to you in the head-down, lumpy, sliding universe.

He bit his teeth together until they hurt. It was a pain different from the other pains which vised and racked and skewered him, because it was a pain he did himself and could shut off himself. That may seem like a small thing, but it isn't. When a helpless man finds he can do anything—anything at all—he isn't helpless any more, even if the thing he does is useless. It was a strange thing he began to do. He began clenching and unclenching his jaw, and he found it was like a pump, emptying him of fear. He knew he could never get it all down to the last drop, but he didn't need that; he just wanted to get rid of enough of it so he could think again.

Slowly he brought his left hand across his body and as far as he

could toward the right. The one hand found the other and the straining fingertips explored the ground next to it. The crack was full of dry dirt, and he dug clumsily to remove it. The effort increased the pressure of his whole body to slide, and the rock under his right hand began to press back. He realized suddenly that the right hand would tire, would simply wear out and quit, if that pressure grew much larger or lasted too long. He sank his left fingers in the crack as deep as they would go. He had to rotate his body slightly for this, and all his plans to move slowly and carefully evaporated in another great wash of terror as his body started to slide. He half sat up and whipped over to get his hands side by side into the crack. His body slid around the two hands as a pivot point and all around him, loose rocks moved in a small cascade, rustling and whispering and ending in a terrible silence just downslope from him as they leaped out into black space. When at last all movement ended he was lying belly-down, with both hands deep in the crack, and he couldn't see anything any more. But at least his head was upslope, and that seemed to do something for him.

He wheezed for breath and spit out dirt. He lay there panting until it hurt a little less to breathe, and he was immediately sorry for that, because the relative relaxation made him able to inventory other sensations. The one which rose over all others like a shout above a murmur was his right leg. He could feel nothing with it but a great constant blare of agony. Something very awful had happened to that leg.

His other one seemed all right. He shifted it a little. He could feel the knee grinding into the mountain, and the shin, but nothing below that. He waggled his foot. He felt nothing with it, and then realized with dreadful clarity that his two feet were projecting over the edge of the precipice.

The realization brought another great towering surf of fear.

He used what he had learned about that: when terror comes you dig in and hold hard and let it roar past and slither back. Don't drown, don't let go. In a second or a minute or perhaps in an age or so, fear will subside. Even if it leaves pieces of itself through and through you, you will, sooner or later, get to where you can think again.

He resettled the grip of his two hands and pulled. His body slid

painfully a fraction of an inch and he heard the beginnings of that whispering rustle as pebbles and dirt began to slide all around him. Well slide if you want to, he told them madly, I'm not going to. He went the other way—he went up. Not much, not quickly, and certainly, not easily.

When he drew his feet up over the edge, he was penalized bitterly—and richly rewarded. The pain in his right leg, when the foot touched the slope and turned, was far past anything he had ever known in all his life, and he cowered down under it and begged it not to make him faint and loosen his grip. But the left toe, seeking like some blind animal, found a little purchase and sent help like a regiment of cavalry in a cowboy-and-Indian picture ta-taaa! and helped his crackling fingers to move him uphill.

It was one of the most glorious moments he had ever known when he drew himself up so his lips were even with his hands. Driven by some impulse he could never have explained, he laughed a short hoarse laugh and put his tongue into the crack of the rocks between his hands. Then he lay there quietly, half-dozing, half-smiling, until it was time to move again.

Now the pulling was a pushing, as he pressed the crack down his body, past his chest, past his stomach. When his hands were fully extended downward he rested again, and then began to draw his left leg. He didn't dare raise himself to his knees yet, and had to bring the leg out and sidewise until his hip-joint all but whimpered for him to stop, but he would not.

Most grudgingly the left leg began to take the burden, and the more it straightened out the more able it became. He slid upward. He dared to reach forward and found a few shreds of grass—no help in themselves but their roots were a tight hummock. He felt it shift when he pulled, so he took it very easy. He got both hands on it and let his left foot say a heartfelt thank-you and good-bye to the crack in the rock, and drew it upward again.

The slope was a little less here and he found it possible to draw his knee straight upward instead of to the side as before—a luxury, an elegance, to be able to do that. His right leg was molten torture. He gritted his teeth against that; he said to himself, now I've just got to switch that off. You do not, of course, switch off the pain of a broken leg. You act as if you could, as if you had. Then somehow you can keep moving.

The slope now was still easier. He stopped to look up. This must have been about where he struck and slid after he jumped. He could not see very well—there was only starlight and the dimmest possible glow from the valley lights—but the cliff above him rose up impossibly sheer, and the nearby level spur on which he lay was not very wide—perhaps fifteen or twenty feet.

He crawled up to the base of the cliff and turned gingerly over, lifting his broken leg with both hands, and let himself down with his back to the rock.

He was so tired and so winded, and in such pain, that the distant lights blurred and whirled; and yet the simple act of sitting, of actually sitting down and leaning back against something, made him feel favored to the point of luxuriousness.

Then it all disappeared into a black and comfortable slumber before he could get it sorted out in his mind.

When he awoke it was in the gray suggestions of false dawn and fevered dream. For a moment he clutched the earth to right and left, and looked across the valley with vertigo—so far away, those lights, so far down. Then the memory flooded back of those minutes—hours, was it? —when he lay on his back with his head downhill and one hand in a crack in the rock, and he looked around him as he sat with his back against the cliff, and almost smiled.

He rocked back and forth to get the blood circulating in his buttocks and legs, and then pressed and clawed himself upright, grunting against the stabs of pain. He rested a moment, standing, then fumbled his fly open and urinated. He didn't push, he just let it happen. There was something very wonderful about the sound of it and the faint, warm, familiar acrid smell. It wasn't that anything was running out of him; it was more that something alive was happening here, and it was important just because of that.

When he was finished he zipped up and looked to right and left. Tumbling rainwater had carved an angled gully down to the shelf on which he stood. It wasn't smooth nor wide nor especially safe—some of it looked like loose and crumbling earth rather than rock—and it was steep.

He began to climb it.

He climbed for nearly five hours. It was only about sixty feet. Once he had to stop to build a road—a road of pebbles and root-

ends and a rock or two, anything he could reach and pack in, a road all of four feet long. Once he slept for a time, twice he fainted when earth fell away from under him and he had to leap to save himself, twisting his injured leg.

And in the fourth and fifth hours something strange happened to Boyle. He began to hurry.

It was the hurry that caused the second of these faints, and when he recovered he had to crouch there for a time and think it out, and wonder why he had hurried, because if there was no reason, then it wasn't smart to go on hurrying, right?

All he could think of was that he wanted to make the top before anyone could come to help him. He didn't understand that at all, so he put it out of his mind, but he stopped pushing quite so hard.

But when he reached the top, he couldn't make it. There was no way to make it. The little crooked sometimes-there, sometimes-not, sometimes-rock, sometimes-earth gully ended in a narrow crack in an overhang.

Boyle sat down under the overhang and looked out over the valley. It was daylight now and all but a few of the lights were gone. The sun wasn't up yet but the distant skyline was black and sharp, and the sky above it had turned from gray to pearl and was beginning to show a cast of pink. He looked up at the underside of that overhang and he suddenly began to get mad.

Among the rubble lying around was a narrow pointed flat stone about eighteen inches long. He picked it up and hefted it, and then began to dig at the overhang. He dug in and up, and earth fell away and went hissing down, and he dug some more. He got expert very quickly on how much he could dig before lumps and clumps of it would fall away. He uncovered some roots and dug around them until, farther in, they weren't threads and strings, but rods and bleached boughs—something to hold to while he reached further, dug deeper. His arms and his back and the left leg which was bearing all his weight began to ache, and then it was more than an ache, it was something that strove to match the torture of his broken right leg. He seemed to be operating some weird sort of contest to see if he could make the rest of his body hurt as much as that leg. He delved inward making a sort of cave into the cliffside, knowing perfectly well that if he undercut

enough he had more than an even chance of bringing the whole thing down on himself and going with it into the valley; but the odds suited him and he wouldn't quit.

For the hundredth time he looked up to gauge the soft material over his head, and when it happened he almost didn't see it—didn't see that the ceiling above him was abruptly lower. It was actually moving when he dropped his stone tool and grasped roots with both hands, twisting them around his wrists and hanging on with all his might.

Almost silently the overhang collapsed, and for a black choking moment he was totally certain he had buried himself. Then the crushing weight slid off his back and he heard the rumble of earth and rocks receding downhill, and shook his head free, and opened his eyes.

There was no more overhang. Where the rain-gully had begun in a narrow slit, there was a wide V, slanting down from the top in a natural 2-to-1 slope, and full of roots. He bellied into it and clawed his way to the top and (with a kind of joy) thirty level feet further before he collapsed.

He lay there for a long time without even trying to think.

Then at last he rolled over, handling his hurt leg as if it was a fragile possession of someone else's, and sat up to look across the valley at the tip of the sun as it pressed up out of its slot behind the hills. All it said to him was that this was a new day, and he didn't have to think about that a lot.

What he did think of, as he sat there in his new day waiting for someone to come along, was the two questions he hadn't asked himself, not for a second, during all those terrible hours:

Why had he jumped?

Why had he climbed?

Just sitting here, watching the sun come up—that was all the answer he needed for the second one.

And the first one just didn't matter any more. Right? he asked himself. "Right," he said.

Uncle Fremmis

“My God!” I cried, “it’s … it can’t be.” Then, a little awed by the fact that my voice didn’t echo in those wide endless corridors—well hell, they had carpeting an inch and a half thick—I added almost shyly, “Uncle Fremmis?”

“Shore is, son,” he said.

I must say, I was shocked.

Uncle Fremmis—actually he was my mother’s uncle—was a hard-bitten, easy-laughing, gray-headed man when I was merely toddling. When I was grown, and before I left the Lake country (there’s mostly hills there, but they call it the Lake country) Uncle Fremmis was still a hard-bitten, easy-laughing gray-headed man. He lived pretty much by himself at one end of a hogback with a kind of pond—what it was was a crooked wide place in a creek—on one side and a deep foggy valley on the other. It was a valley nobody wanted, I guess—even now it’s the same way it always was, and Uncle Fremmis used to like to watch the light come before the sun did, and the rabbits and all, and squirrels red and gray and bobolinks and the deer that would graze on the steep grass until the sun burned the mist away. He used to hang around town a lot and was a very popular man although as far as I know he was never really close to anybody. When he needed staples he’d turn his hand to everything—splitting wood with a go-devil, or digging wells, or swamping (which means anything you want it to mean) around the lumber mill. Flour and salt and needles—that’s the kind of stuff he’d buy. Yellow soap and Levis and every few years a bucket and an ax, a whetstone, a pitcher.

He made enemies; they were always the same kind of man.

The first one that I remember was a blacksmith. He rightly hated Uncle Fremmis, and came up to him on the street one day with his hand out, and Uncle Fremmis grinned his quick grin and took it, and the blacksmith snatched him off his feet and stomped him, which didn’t do either one of them any good because folks stopped dealing with him pretty much except when they had to,

and when folks like that want to get along without having to, they can go a long way. I recall one farmer used a one-wheeled hay rake for close to three years rather than have that smith fix a busted axle cap. The right side of the rake rode on a skid like a travois, that the farmer made out of old spring leaves. Uncle Fremmis never did anything to get back at the blacksmith except to stand in the middle of the street laughing the day the smith nailed up the FOR SALE sign on his shop.

The years rolled by slower in that country, somehow, than other places, but they brought new things all the same. The workhorses went the way of the buggy horses and everybody had a tractor, and it was old Pidgeon, that owned the gas station, who got to bad-mouthing Uncle Fremmis so much. Uncle Fremmis paid that no mind at all until Pidgeon bought into the general store and tried to stop Uncle Fremmis' credit, because things were up and down with Uncle Fremmis and when they were down the credit made a lot of difference, and never once in his life did he leave a bill unpaid (nor run up more than maybe forty dollars worth of them). When word got around about that, business fell off so bad at the gas station and the tractor shop that was part of it that old Pidgeon was hard put to it to pay his bills. Tractors just didn't hardly break down any more and when they did, somehow there was always a neighbor to borrow one from, and some of the horses still left around came out of pasture and went back to work again. Before you know it old Pidgeon had to sell out his piece of the general store and then Uncle Fremmis had his credit back again. That gas station and the repair shop never did do real well until old Pidgeon sold out, either.

And when I was in the high school there was a wall-eyed young man name of Skutch who opened up an electric and radio place. He did real good until the second time he tried to hurt Uncle Fremmis. The first time he said it was an accident, when he hired him to help out one afternoon and told him to hold onto a wire and then did something that gave Uncle Fremmis such a shock it laid him out and he swallowed his tongue, he really did, and that would have been all for Uncle Fremmis if Dr. Weiss hadn't happened by and hooked the tongue back with his finger and brought him around. The second time Skutch went after Uncle Fremmis with his Essex Terraplane automobile; he said that was an accident too, but if it was it was an accident that went a

quarter mile along Beasley Road and out into Roudenbush's cornfield with Uncle Fremmis jumping and ducking like a jackrabbit until Skutch saw Roudenbush sitting there on his tractor watching, so he quit. After that Skutch's trade fell off real bad and if you had a business in town and you bought from Skutch, somehow your business would fall off too, so Skutch didn't last long.

Whenever Uncle Fremmis needed more than just his staples, he would dowse. He was a waterfinder; he'd whittle you a piece of apple (some dowsers use willow, but Uncle Fremmis always cut a little Y off a green apple tree) and walk around with it in his hands, and where it bent down sharp he'd say dig, and there was your well. He only did this three times that I can remember, and it cost five hundred dollars a time, and he got it because his deal was real straight: if he said dig and there was no water, you didn't pay him. (The price of the digging was your gamble.) All those three times he was right and got his money. He got kind of famous around there for that and had all the offers he could have wanted, but he didn't want them. He didn't believe in the income tax and never would earn more than five hundred dollars in a year.

He never did marry that I know of. He visited around a little, and it's a measure of where he stood in the Lake country that although they like to gossip as much as anybody anywhere, they let Uncle Fremmis' business be his business, except maybe one or another of the ladies would nudge the latest one a little and slip her a wink and make her blush. So all in all he didn't need much more than he made helping out here and there, except for something special, or to catch up on the store account after a bed spell.

One of the something specials was a Model I-NC quarter ton panel truck. You probably don't remember the I-NC. It was the last four-cylinder wheels that Henry ever made. (I don't count the Jeep because that wasn't Henry's to begin with.) The truck had this funny little corn popper up front and right behind it the biggest four-speed gearbox you ever saw, so that in low-low it would walk up the side of a billboard if you could find some way to make it stick on. The speedometer only went up to sixty which if you ever drove a I-NC is just childish, like little kids betting a million; downhill, flat out, and with a following wind a I-NC

could maybe go forty-three. Anyway Uncle Fremmis fell in love with one and found water for some dude over in Clearwater and took the money and bought the truck. He got Ed Varney to take out the corn-popper and put in a rebuilt V-8 from Sears and Roebuck, and a two-speed rear axle off a Reo. He got Ed to do it because with mechanical things Uncle Fremmis was the best water dowser and well digger around, if you see what I mean. Anyway that old I-NC, peeling green paint and rust spots and all, turned into something like a buzz bomb with the wings chopped. Riding in it with Uncle Fremmis was a real hairy experience. The speedo needle would go right away up to the sixty and hit a pin there, and after that you could see it bend. The suspension was narrow-gauge and the tires were 6-15's and the shocks were long gone and pure decoration. The body was very high and narrow and kind of humped and when it got to swaying a bit it would pick up both left wheels and then both right wheels and you wouldn't know what that thumping was until you asked Uncle Fremmis and he told you. On the other hand, no matter how useless Uncle Fremmis was with a wrench, he was a fine artist with the wheel and he never did flip that thing. Nobody ever knew how fast it would go. He let it out on the State highway one afternoon and a state patrolman on a hog chased him a ways and then let him go because he was afraid to catch him; he said later that what was sure to happen he just couldn't bear to see, but anyway he clocked him at eighty-seven and caught him on the way back. Uncle Fremmis, because he was Uncle Fremmis, wound up without a ticket and, for an hour and a half, with the policeman's head under the hood and down under, looking up at that monstrous rear axle. That cop later won a NASCAR finals, and used to tell about Uncle Fremmis and how he started him on the hot wheels, but that's another story. Anyway it was that truck that led me to understand about Uncle Fremmis.

I had a girl, I mean I meant to have her, who had a mother who had a cow who had a calf who didn't like me, I mean the mother; and I knew I'd never so much as get up to the barricades, let alone cross them, unless I could make the mother glad at me. Well she sold this calf to a farmer over to West Fork who wouldn't come for it and she wouldn't bring it without two dollars extra, so there it stood, her wanting the money and him wanting the calf and her saying to come for it and him saying

bring it and her saying for two dollars and him saying no, so I borrowed the truck.

I borrowed Uncle Fremmis' truck, and you know I never did get that calf over to West Fork. I never got the calf. I didn't get but halfway to her mother's place and then turned that thing around somehow and got it back to Uncle Fremmis. You see, it had a gas pedal on it that was hinged at the back, down on the floor, and the pin had long ago worked out of the hinge. With a working hinge the pedal would push a wire which would feed the gas. With the pin out the pedal would layover sideways every time you put your foot down, and if you were in anything higher than low gear, the motor would stall. You've balanced a broom on the end of your finger—everybody has. Well that's what you had to do with your foot on that gas pedal, except you don't move your foot around with the precision of a finger. It might seem like a small thing the way I say it, but you just try it with a big V-8 up front and a 2-speed axle behind and a banging, swaying zombie (remember a zombie is the walking dead) of an obsolete panel truck all around you, and your head full of plans about doing the calf bit and collecting your just reward. I was like frustrated.

Uncle Fremmis just laughed a lot. But I began to realize what I guess I had known for a long time—Uncle Fremmis was not like other people. I mean he didn't even have a lock on that truck, just a toggle switch. He just had a—

He had a way of making things work.

Don't think that means he could fix things. It doesn't mean that. He couldn't fix anything but dinner. Well, here's what I mean: he had an old radio in the house, a car radio he ran off a spare battery he would switch every now and then with the one in the truck. Sometimes the radio would hang onto a station all right but something had got old in its guts, and it would drop down to a whisper and then when you turned it up so you could hear it, it would suddenly cut in so loud it would make you bite your tongue. Uncle Fremmis would run his hand over it, back and forth and up and back again, and then the hand would stop, and maybe move over a quarter inch, and then whammo, he'd fetch it a stinging blow with the heel of his hand, and it would be all right again for a month.

Which is also why he had so many friends, and a number of real bad enemies. Uncle Fremmis was just not quite like other

people.

It was around this time—the girl with the mother and the cow and the calf and all that—that I started to get into trouble. Life was so simple and good then that I didn't know how simple and good it was. I guess it began when I borrowed twenty dollars from Sam Pritchard and promised to pay him in two weeks and couldn't. I borrowed thirty from old Joe at the barbershop so I could pay Sam, but I had to have a little for myself. When it came time to pay Joe, I went to Sam again. He was willing, but he only had twenty, so I was ten short. I needed a little for myself so I borrowed twenty from Hank Johanssen, and about then things began to get complicated. I somehow got Sam and Joe down to thirty apiece after a while, and carried it back and forth between them for about six weeks. Then I couldn't pay Hank and he got real mad at me and told Joe to watch out for me, so the next time I asked Joe for twenty he just said no. I thought that over for a while and then had a bright idea, and I still think it was a good one: I said to Joe he should give Sam thirty dollars, and in two weeks Sam could give him thirty dollars, and I'd just be out of it and could concentrate on Hank. And he threw me out of the barbershop.

So then I thought of Uncle Fremmis, and I thought this: (a) there was no way of knowing how much Uncle Fremmis had, so maybe he would have fifty bucks; (b) he didn't really need anything, so it would probably be all right if he didn't get it back; and (c) he'd lent me his truck once, hadn't he, so why wouldn't he lend me money? I went straight up to the hogback and the pole-and-shake house made of one hundred percent repairs on a tar-paper lean-to from thirty years ago, and it was there all right but he wasn't, and neither was the I-NC. I asked around and found he'd left in it and nobody knew where, and he never came back at all that I know of. I remember feeling real mad at Uncle Fremmis, deserting me like that.

I was around town for a while after that but things got much too complicated. I never could figure out how it all happened, but it got so I couldn't borrow anything anymore, and if I couldn't borrow, how was I going to pay anyone? It was a lot simpler to go to the city and let them all work it out for themselves.

I did much better in the city, by which I mean in three years I owed about twelve thousand. I kept thinking about the guy who

founded one of the most successful motel chains in the United States. When he was a teenager he made up his mind to owe a million by the time he was twenty-five. He made it and became a big wheel. I guess I just didn't have his class. It was taking me a lot longer and the world seems to be kind of intolerant of guys who take long.

So I was at a party, brought there by a chick who thought some other people might think I was funny (because you can't get the country out of the boy) and I zeroed in on a guy in a silk suit who had an office in this skyscraper. It was in the part of a skyscraper they call Towers, which is up on top where they have these thick carpets in all the hallways and you have to change elevators before you get there and the Tower elevator has a plug-ugly running it and you better have a reason. I had a reason but I also had Silk Suit's card which I hoped he was still drunk enough to remember how drunk he was when he gave it to me, and I got into his office and hit him for half a G, and when he asked me what for, I couldn't think of a good enough reason so he threw me out. Which was what was happening and why I was there when I ran into Uncle Fremmis. "What," I said to him, "the hell are you doing here, Uncle Fremmis?" He was dressed in blue Lee work pants and shirt with keys on a belt clip. He wasn't carrying a broom or wheeling a waxing machine but he might as well. But it really was Uncle Fremmis, all those miles and years away from the hogback, the valley full of morning mist, the crooked pond; most of all away from town where all those people used to like him so much. Need him.

"Don't have time to tell you, son," he said. "Come along and I'll show you."

He hurried me along the corridor. His hand on my arm was rock-hard and his movements quick and definite; the years hadn't changed him one bit. I don't mean the years since he had left town; I mean the years since I first toddled up to his kneecap and I looked up at that quick smile.

We passed doors with polite little names on them—most of them I'd seen in the papers at one time or another, you know, dollar-a-year men called in to advise the President, men's names that have become trademarks like Eveready or Birdseye, and then the ones I hadn't seen before doubtless because of my own ignorance or because they were so big and powerful nobody even

knew they existed—they just ran things. One name I did know, though, and it stopped me cold and I said “Wow.” Semlar E. Warburg, M.D., A.P.A. “Wow. He’s the one who—”

“That’s the one,” said Uncle Fremmis. We were talking about the most famous psychiatrist in the whole entire world, a shrink who had written books and who had a “school”—that means a special way of doing his thing where whole colleges full of graduates go out and hang up shingles and do the same—or try to. Years back he would be called once in a while in law cases; he was far above that now, you might as well call in the Pope or J. Edgar. Uncle Fremmis unhooked his keys and turned those bright eyes on me: you could feel it when he did that, they like had points like a fence staple. “Now you listen to me, son,” he said, in the way that made you listen to him, “what you’re goin’ to see you keep to yourself, right? And if you have to talk, keep your voice down.”

I said I would, and he unlocked a narrow door next one down from Dr. Warburg’s. I thought it was a broom closet until we were inside and he reached past me and closed the door. It locked with a heavy click. It was dark as the inside of a coal miner’s lunch box. “Wait a bit until you can see,” he said quietly, and I did, and sure enough, pretty soon I could make out that we were in a dark narrow corridor with what felt like foam rubber underfoot. “Wait now,” he said when I was about to ask a question; he seemed to know it.

Suddenly there was a blaze of light a few feet ahead. It made me jump. Uncle Fremmis said, “As the cigar said to the cigarette, son, we got here just in the nicotine.” He nudged me painfully in the ribs and then said, “No foolin’, I cut that too fine. He likes me to be here a half hour ahead.” He waved me toward the light.

It looked like a square window of plate glass set in the wall.

Through it I saw a woman seated in an armless easy chair, half-turned toward me, and not three feet away. I couldn’t help myself, I ducked back out of the way before she could see me. Uncle Fremmis chuckled quietly. “Don’t let that worry you, son. That there’s one of those one-way mirrors. Long as it’s dark in here it looks like a mirror in there. She can’t see you.” Reassured, I looked again.

On a low table six feet away from the woman—a well-dressed woman with that harried look that people with money seem to

carry like a club membership—was a black box with three knobs and a shiny reflector about the size of a salad plate standing on edge. In the center of the reflector was what looked like a radio tube. Adjusting the dials, with a note pad in his hand, was a middle-aged man.

“That’s him,” said Uncle Fremmis.

“That’s who?”

“The great man,” grinned Uncle Fremmis. “Doctor Warburg.”

I stared with disbelief. No goatee, no Austrian pipe, no funny European clothes. Just a man. “What’s that gadget?”

“A BWS. Brain-wave synchronizer. It flashes. You turn those knobs, it makes it flash however often you want it to, as bright as you want it to.”

“What’s it for?”

“The way he explains it to me, everybody’s brain has a certain kind of pulsebeat. The first time somebody comes here, he spends an hour or so finding out what it is. He writes that down, and sets the machine for it. After that, all he has to do is switch it on and it switches the person off.”

“You mean like hypnotizes them?”

“Not ‘like,’ son—it does hypnotize ’em, in thirty, forty seconds instead of the thirty, forty minutes of hocus-pocus-your-eyes-are-gettin’-heavy.”

“Then what?”

“Once they go under, Doc tells ’em they’re goin’ to disremember everything that happens until he says to wake up.”

“And what happens?”

“Me,” said Uncle Fremmis with some enjoyment. Before I could say anything to this, the man in the other room switched on the little machine. The tube lit up, not too bright, in a series of flashes of orange light. Each flash was probably no more than a hundredth of a second and the flashes came ... I don’t know how frequently. Something slower than a steady light, something faster than a flicker. I became aware that Uncle Fremmis was watching me intently. “Son?”

“What?”

“It’s all right. Just wondered if it had got to you. Isn’t much chance that you and her, or any two people, have exactly the same frequency with the brain wave, but if you did, that thing would put you under ’fore you could say Boo. ’Course, you’re not

gettin' what she's gettin'—the reflector's givin' it to her head on. Whup! There she goes."

In the other room, we could see the woman's eyelids droop.

They didn't quite close. She sat relaxed with her hands on her lap, staring straight in front of her. Dr. Warburg passed his hand close to her eyes and she didn't blink. He leaned close and appeared to be telling her something; at length she nodded slowly.

The doctor looked straight at us and beckoned.

"Back off out of the way," said Uncle Frcmmis, "both when I go in there and when I come out. I don't think the doc'd be too happy about somebody in here with me," and he gave me a little shove back and turned a knob under the "window," which was my first intimation that it was really a door. It opened and let him into the room with the lady and the doctor, and he closed it behind him. I got where I could see again.

The doctor waved a hand and Uncle Fremmis answered something; they both laughed. I could see this was a very familiar thing to them. The doctor made a "she's-all-yours" kind of gesture and Uncle Fremmis stepped over to the lady. She didn't seem to notice him at all—just kept staring at the little machine. Or maybe she didn't even see it any more. It made no difference when Uncle Fremmis passed between it and her.

He moved around her, looking at her, looking for something. Then he began to put his hands on her, or so close to her that he was almost touching; I couldn't be sure. I thought she might hit him for it or draw back, or the doctor would stop him, but no. After a while—oh, a minute and a half—his hands settled around her head and face, and finally over her left ear. He moved his left fingertips back and forth an inch or so, and they settled on a certain spot and rested there, and then shifted just a little, little bit. Uncle Fremmis seemed to be concentrating real hard. When he found exactly what he seemed to be looking for, he raised his right hand up and back ... the whole thing reminded me of something I'd seen before, but I didn't know what ... then he fetched her such a lick alongside of the head I bit my tongue, and with the pain came the memory of that old car radio he had in his shack that wouldn't work right till he hit it a certain way in a certain place.

The lady's head rocked a bit but otherwise she just sat there,

looking at the blinking light. Uncle Fremmis made the O sign for "OK" with his thumb and forefinger, grinned at the doctor and came back to me. I got out of the way as he opened the little door and came back into the secret corridor and shut it again. The whole thing hadn't taken more than two minutes.

We watched together while the doctor shut off the little machine and bent close to the lady, talking. We couldn't hear him but I could tell he was bringing her out of it. At first she just blinked slowly and began to raise a hand to put it against her head where she'd been hit, but the doc caught both her hands and went on talking until she was fully awake and looking at him. Then she smiled. It was a real nice smile, all that harried, harrassed look gone from her. Really gone. It was a nice smile.

Head close to mine as we watched, Uncle Fremmis said in my ear, "You always used to be a bright boy, son. What do you think happened?"

I didn't know what to think. I said, "You'll laugh at me."

"No." That's one of the smallest words there is, but he packed a heap into it. He wouldn't laugh at me. So I said the crazy thing that had crept into my head. I said, "You hit her just the way you used to with that old radio you had."

He sounded like he really admired me. "Oh, you are a bright one." And he patted my shoulder. Then he asked me how things were going back home.

It happens I'd been back for a week or so three months ago so I told him. The Lake country wasn't the same any more, like the twentieth century had got there at last altogether, not just a bit here and a piece there. I told him the way you do with down-home folks away from home, you know—who'd sold out and who had to get married and what happened to the church clock. He soaked it all in; I thought he looked sad. While I was talking the doctor in the other room got the lady up and they walked out together and the doc switched out the lights in there, and it was dark again in the corridor. Uncle Fremmis made no move to leave, so I went on talking in the dark. I said I didn't think I'd go back to the town again any more, ever; it wasn't really all that different from any other town now.

Just then the light came on again and we saw the doctor bringing in another one, and I recognized this one right away. He was a United States senator, been one for years. The doctor sat

him down and reset the knobs on the little machine and put him under, and then Uncle Fremmis slipped out there and—and fixed him. Or not ‘fixed him’—as he told me later, you couldn’t call what he did ‘fixing.’ It’s something else there’s no real word for; Uncle Fremmis didn’t know how to fix things, not really. This time there was no feeling around either; he went straight to the old Senator and lifted up the Senator’s left hand to about shoulder high and snapped it down so hard I thought it might come off at the shoulder. If the doctor hadn’t been hanging on tight I do believe he’d have tumbled the old feller right off the chair. Then he came back to me and we went on chatting while the doctor turned off the machine and brought the Senator around and led him out.

“It’s my fault,” Uncle Fremmis said sadly when he got back to me. “I mean about the town. It was me made it the way it was. Kep’ it the way it was. I didn’t mean to do it; I didn’t know. It was Doc Warburg there made me realize it. And then it’s my fault that things have changed so, too. To this day I don’t know which was best.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I got to say, I liked it the way it was.”

“The way it was was a backwater,” he said sharply. I could see this whole thing meant a lot to him. “If a thing’s alive it’s got to change. If it stops changing it could be a lot of things—fun to be with or funny to look at or something for college folks to study, but it ain’t alive no more, and a town’s like a person, it has a right to be alive and grow and change and nobody should stop it.”

“You mean you stopped it? How could you stop it?”

“Well, I made things work. I mean like that old lawnmower of Artie Backer’s, with the kerosene motor. I used to go over to Artie’s every six weeks during the warm weather and kick it. Wasn’t nobody that knew where to kick it or how hard but me, and for me it worked. Old Mrs. Roudenbush, she had a meat grinder that would jam up so she couldn’t turn it ‘less I took hold of the crank and shook it just so.”

And it all came back in a flood—Wertenbaker’s tractor and Samuel’s windmill pump and the church clock and dozens, scores, hundreds of other things, big and little, and Uncle Fremmis, drifting around town, knowing everybody and what everybody

had that didn't work right, and making it go. Alarm clocks and sewing machines and the farm stuff—seeders and harrows and spreaders and drills.

And I recalled the blacksmith who had tromped him on the village street and the electrician who'd tried twice to wipe out Uncle Fremmis, and I began to understand those things, why they were enemies and why the town rode 'em out. When the light in the other room came on and I could see him again I looked at him with brand new eyes, like I'd never seen him before. I watched while he went in to the doctor and that famous preacher you've all seen on the TV, and while the preacher slumped there staring into the blinking light, Uncle Fremmis fetched him a hell of a clip between the shoulder blades with the heel of his hand.

When he came back I asked him how he'd happened to come here, and he told me about it, setting up in his cabin watching the rabbits in the steep meadow one early morning, and he seen somebody moving around down by the crooked pond on the other side of the hogback. "A nippy morning, it was," he said, "and there was this man in his shirt sleeves wading into the water so I knew right away something was haywire and I scrambled down there. There was a monstrous big Cadillac parked on the west bank and this feller was heading out for deep water with a kind of I-can't-see-you look on his face. I brought him back. He didn't want to come. Much bigger'n me, so when talkin' didn't help and pullin' and haulin' didn't help I did the only thing I could think of.... Hell, I didn't even think. I mean it was like he wasn't a man at all but a threshin' machine with a jammed conveyor or some kid's old Mickey Mouse watch. I mean it was a tight thing, son, he could've dragged me into the deep water too, so all I did was the only thing I could do. I hit him a certain way." He prodded me on the right side, a little above the waist. "'Long about here, and it straightened him right out. He stopped dead an' looked at me like wonderin' where he was at, so we waded ashore and come up to my place and drank a lot of coffee and dried out in front of the fire. Here comes the Maestro."

We looked through the mirror and saw one of the world's biggest orchestra leaders, so corny even country people laugh at him but what the hell, if you like bubbles and music ex-act-ly on-the-beat, you got a right. Uncle Fremmis went in there and turned the guy's right foot half around and held it between his knees

while he reached up and gave him a kind of karate chop on the neck, not too hard. When he came back he went on, "We talked all that day an' into the next night, me and the doc there. He's a big man, son, and I don't mean money and I don't mean all the books he's wrote and all. He's a big man with a clear head who ain't afraid to look at the truth even if the truth looks crazy. He told me about how it is in his line of work, how hard it is to rub up against so many people's nuttiness without it rubs off on them, and how the load of nuttiness he'd been carryin' just got so big over the years that one day somethin' snapped an' he took off in his big shiny Cadillac an' just drove an' drove till he wound up in the early mornin' lookin' at water, an' he just promptly waded in to drown himself. Yeah. He told me straight. And what I'd done when I hit him like that cleared the whole thing up for him somehow, made him see it all, made him work again like a ol' sewing machine or school bus or whatever. So he asked me a lot about me, an' we got into this thing about me not lettin' the town grow up natural. It made me feel real bad. Then he said for me to come to the city an' help him, an' he left, an' I thought it over for a couple days an' jumped into my truck an' took off."

"And now you fix people instead of things."

He snorted. "I don't fix nothing, son. I never did. I can't. It's like Artie Backer's lawn mower—what I did I had to do again every six weeks. Sometimes I could make things go for a year or more, sometimes a week. Each one's different. Same with these folks here. They all have to come back sooner or later, when the worn-out part inside, whatever it is, starts to act up. Dr. Warburg, I got to hit him like that about every nine months."

"What about the blinking light thing? Window dressing?"

I think that bugged him. "Window dressing hell. Do you think these people would hold still for what I do if they knowed it was me doin' it? That machine, and the way Warburg uses it, just makes it so they never see me."

"What do you need him for, Uncle Fremmis? My God, you could set up shop for yourself and make a mint."

"I don't want a mint, son. Never did. Anyway, who would want to go see a crazy old man to git slapped in the chops when they started to act crazy or couldn't cut the mustard any more?"

"A lot of people. Word gets out.... You'd make a—"

"These people wouldn't. An' that's the big thing, son. These

people are the big ones. These people are the ones who make things go. Only thing is, they git worn-out after a bit and it kind of poisons the things they do. Everybody says the world's goin' to hell in a hand-basket, but it won't if we can keep enough of the top ones straightened out. There ain't many really top ones—never was. And we ain't got 'em all, but we're workin' on it. An' it strikes me that's a lot more use than keepin' a sewing machine running just because it belonged to somebody's granny, or to help a pinchpenny keep a ol' pump instead of buyin' a new one an' helpin' keep work an' jobs comin'."

I began to see a number of things, but one took my attention like a bikini in a hotel lobby, and that was, Uncle Fremmis was standing right next to a classic buck. "Uncle Fremmis," I said, "I need five thousand dollars."

Well I won't go into all the talk we had then while he asked me what I'd been doing and how I'd been living, but with him you couldn't duck straight questions and you couldn't make things look good when they weren't. When he was done asking and I was done telling I felt like something you shovel out of a cowbarn.

He looked at me for a long time and then heaved a deep breath. "Tell you what, son," he said, "I'll do what I can for you. It won't take but a minute. We won't use no gadget box because between you and me we don't need it. Only I got to tell you up front, you ain't goin' to enjoy it, I ain't goin' to enjoy it, and you'll have to come back for more every once in a while—you'll know when."

"Do I get my five G's?" was all I could think of.

He clapped me heartily on the shoulder. It was real affection, and I could have cried. "You sure do, and more. All you want."

I said, "Then fire away."

So then and there, in the dark corridor, he ran his hands over me. They hardly touched, like butterflies. I heard him kind of grunt, and he moved his hands a bit more and they rested.

"Come on," he said. He took me out to the hallway outside. He looked up and down and there was nobody out there. So he did his thing, and you better believe it, it was one hell of a jolt. Oh my but he is a strong old man.

I went out that day and got a job. I did fine. I'm doing fine. And every once in a while, when I know it's time, I go back and

see Uncle Fremmis. I know it's time when I begin to think I can't get along another day without borrowing money. Then I go back to him and he fetches me another good swift kick in the ass.

Necessary and Sufficient

I

Merrihew was a troubleshooter. There had never been one like him, so there was no name for what he did. Dr. Poole was head of the Institute, mostly because he could sense trouble before it happened. Sensing it and doing something about it were two different things. Merrihew could do something about it. His record was most confidential but his batting average was high. Incredibly high.

And you wouldn't have thought so to look at him.

Dr. Poole had called Merrihew and they had met for lunch. When the waiter went away with his order Merrihew wanted to know the name of the trouble.

"Lasvogel," said Dr. Poole. "Look Merrihew, we have a chemistry section here—three, really, if you figure inorganic and bio and organic as separate, which they practically are. Then there's electron physics and computer design and the mechanical section and the socio think-tank and some other stuff. And if Lasvogel wanted to call himself section head of every one of them he'd have the right. Only it would look funny on the organization chart—and anyway he wouldn't want it."

Merrihew said, "That's who he is, not your trouble."

Dr. Poole wagged his big white head. "Oh, Lasvogel's the trouble all right. He's coming apart."

"Eggs in one basket," Merrihew said. "All those departments with the head lopped off?"

"All those departments could struggle along just fine without him. Emphasis on struggle, maybe, but—they'd make it. It's the West Ecuador thing. Actually I don't mind if he cracks up after he's solved that one—he's earned a good breakdown. I just want him to hang together until then."

"What's the West—"

"Quiet." The waiter came, put down drinks, went away. Dr. Poole was studious with ice cubes for a moment. He made a

motion with his head that brought Merrihew leaning closer.

"Code name. It isn't Ecuador and it isn't West—and if you can do your work without knowing where it is, all the better. If Lasvogel can stay with it until he finds an answer you may never find out—and that's all right."

"How much longer does he need?"

"I wish I knew. Oh, I wish I knew. It could be tonight, tomorrow. It could be weeks."

"Or never?"

"Don't say that." Dr. Poole made a terribly controlled warding-off gesture. "Don't even think it."

"And there isn't anyone else who might—"

"No there isn't. Or maybe there is, but the only way to find him would be to describe the problem—and I can't do that."

"Better do it now, though."

Dr. Poole gave him a long, sharp look. The waiter came with the salads, fussed about, went away again. "All right then," said the director of the world's quietest and most extraordinary consulting company. "Overpopulation. Everything comes down to that. Too many people. Not just pollution but geopolitics—nations looking for room to expand. Businesses—they overbreed too—looking for markets. But the trouble is also too many kids in the classroom—a solitary man looking for some place to walk where it's wild and quiet. There are other problems besides overpopulation, but if we can whip that one we can whip them all."

"Better hurry," said Merrihew.

"Yes, of course. Of course: I know what you mean. It's already too late for some things. A whole ocean could die if we controlled population by tomorrow night. But you see, that's what we've done. What Lasvogel's done."

"You lost me."

Dr. Poole looked to right and left and leaned close again. "The place we call West Ecuador has the highest birth rate in the hemisphere. Or almost," he added. Maybe the hedging words were a scientist's exactitude and maybe they were a little something to keep curiosity at bay. "We have ways of keeping day-to-day tabs on it, primitive as it is. Every doctor, every clinic in West Ecuador is feeding our computers, whether anyone of

them knows it or not. We can even get the midwives, about five-eighths of them—much more than half anyway. We've been setting the place up for an experiment for a long time. You don't much approve of a tactic like that."

"I didn't say anything."

"Most people wouldn't approve. High-handed, undignified—I've heard all the names for it. I also know all the preachments about means and ends. We're doing what we're doing because we haven't been able to find another way—and because something has to be done now and not when we can do a public-relations job and then put it through the courts. Little kids with blown-up bellies, toothpicks for arms and legs and sores all over—yes, we're doing it for them. But also because West Ecuador is a preview. The whole world is going to be like that—not might be, is going to be—if something isn't done now."

Merrihew put up both hands in a way that said, *Well, all right, dammit.*

"We threw it to Lasvogel," Dr. Poole said, "and he came through." He added a little anxiously: "Lasvogel always comes through. Anyway, his treatment batted a thousand on a hundred and twenty-three cases. Injections. Not one of the recipients got pregnant. No side effects. I know what you're going to say," Dr. Poole added quickly, "Nothing new, eh? That Swedish pill, take it tonight, get your period tomorrow whether you've conceived or not? Wait—there's more."

Merrihew sat silent.

"Lasvogel's whole approach was different," Dr. Poole continued, "and that's all I'll say about it—except his preparation is more potent than you'd believe. More even than Lasvogel believed. We did a mass treatment. Well, I'll tell you: we had a prevailing wind situation and we did it with a chemical fog. Lasvogel—we—we figured it might affect some women in a nearby city to some measurable extent. As I said, we've spent a lot of time and a lot of money setting up observation posts. We were looking for a decimal point and maybe three zeros before we came to a number—no more than that."

Dr. Poole sat and wagged his head. It looked for a while as if he had forgotten what he was saying, forgotten his lunch and his guest, forgotten even this tumbling urgency. Then he asked, "In five weeks, in a population pushing two million, know how many

pregnancies we recorded in West Ecuador?’?”

It was not Merrihew’s style to respond to rhetorical questions. He simply waited.

“Seventeen. Seventeen, in five weeks.”

“Wow.” Merrihew cut steak, forked it up, lifted it, looked at it, put it down. “Wow.” Pollution, belly bloat and toothpick legs, war and pestilence—and cold greed is emperor: survival is greed. And then—how had Dr. Poole put it? —a solitary man walking some place where it’s wild and quiet. Merrihew had time to get a glimpse of a man like that in a place like that and think that it might after all be that way when Dr. Poole had to go and say, “They were all white.”

Merrihew hadn’t gotten to be what he was by being uncool—and it could be that he looked the part. But once in his life a flashbulb had gone off in his face in a dark room and once someone he had loved had died in his arms and once he had had to blow the whistle on the best friend he ever had, who died of it. This thing he had just heard was like all those at once; it made him bite his tongue the same way. It could be that he heard nothing at all for a long moment because he didn’t want to hear anything else; he wanted to tip time backward and not know what he had just been told. He came back slowly—as if someone had a volume control to bring up sound gradually from silence—and heard Dr. Poole say something about cloud formation.

“There’s a central mountain range and, like all such, it has cloud cover most of the day. Lasvogel thinks the chemical fog went in over the city and upslope on a thermal current. He really had no idea the stuff would work in dilutions like that, but it did. When it got to the cloud it dispersed right through it in a few hours—well, he had anticipated that part. Then, of course, it rained. It rains every day in that place for a little while. It was the rain that brought it down on the lee side—so, you see, the whole place was covered.

Merrihew recognized a flicker of surprise in himself when he tried his voice and it worked. “Anybody live in those mountains—or are they all in the city?””

“I see what you’re thinking,” Dr. Poole said. “Maybe we missed someone. Well, forget it. Yes, there are villages and small holdings all through the area. But you’ve got to accept what I

said: we've had the whole place bugged for years now—crossroads clinics, private doctors, the pathological labs and the midwives. Trust the figures."

"How big is the white population?"

"Less than five percent. Two couples from the Peace Corps who settled there, some teachers and doctors, business people. Also some East Indian settlements and orientals. No pregnancies there either. Just Caucasians."

Merrihew's steak was cold. He put his fork down. "Too big to get hold of all at once. You're taking a hell of a chance telling anyone about this. Even me."

"Stick that in your cap for a feather. The record says you can be trusted."

Merrihew looked him in the eye. "Nobody can be trusted with this one. All I can do is the best I can. Let's get back to work."

"Work? Ah. Your part in this, you mean. All I can tell you is what needs to be done and let you take it from there. I can't tell you what to do." He smiled briefly. "From what I hear, nobody can. That's how you work."

"Lasvogel," Merrihew said tersely. He meant, *Get to the point.*

"Very well. Lasvogel is the key to everything. He's on the track of an answer and he will come through—although maybe I say that because I have no alternative. But I'm afraid he won't last the stretch. He's under some kind of pressure that's brought him to the breaking point and I'm scared."

"I'm scared just hearing about it."

"Oh, you don't understand. It isn't West Ecuador. I know the man. I've seen him under stress—work stress—before. This is something different. Something outside. It isn't physical—I have the right to order an examination and I did that, though I thought he was going to spit in my eye. All I got out of that is what I already knew—he's under stress. Dr. Genovese—the Institute head medic—laid it to work pressure and told him to ease up, told me to ease up, too. But I know better."

"How?"

Dr. Poole almost shrugged, almost gestured, barely shook his head. "Call it intuition. Call it my special talent the way you'd call Lasvogel's problem-solving a special talent. We give things names and think we have answers. They aren't answers but sometimes they make us feel better." He drew a deep breath.

“Anyway, your problem is Lasvogel. Find out what’s cutting him up and give me an idea of what can be done about it. Your problem is *not* West Ecuador. He’ll handle that. Here.” He removed an envelope from his breast pocket and handed it to Merrihew. “Here’s a personnel profile plus all the addresses, telephone numbers and peripheral information you can possibly need. Numbers you can reach me twenty-four hours a day—and don’t hesitate on that one. A drawing account. It doesn’t say so on the paper, but believe me, it’s open-ended. And I’ve bothered to write one thing down in red: *Respect Lasvogel’s privacy.* He’s obsessive about that. He must never have the slightest suspicion that you’re on the job or what the job is. I can put it to you this way: he’s the most totally devoted and conscientious man I have ever met, but if he thought he was being spied on, he’d quit the Institute—West Ecuador and all. The only other thing I have to say to you is something that doesn’t need saying: God help us if West Ecuador goes on much longer the way it is. Already there will have to be a wrinkle in the birth statistics that some sharp eyes will pick up. Imagine nine months from now when the news gets out that there’s a place where there have been no non-white births in a population of two million. You feel all right, Merrihew?”

Merrihew stood up. “I feel we’ve been sitting here too long. Talking too much.”

“But—”

“You said it was all in here,” and Merrihew tapped the envelope. “You better be right.” And he ran out.

II

Slit-eyed, thin-lipped, Merrihew went straight to a place he knew and began to work.

The place was a park bench off the mall, in a little hollow overarched by linden trees. Aside from turning pages from the envelope, which took him less than twenty minutes, he sat motionless, legs splayed out, eyes all but closed, for nearly two hours.

There were things about this job which ran 180 degrees out of phase with the way he worked, the way he thought. Don’t think of exactly where West Ecuador is, what it is (although “prevailing

wind situation” and “central range with cloud cover ... it rains every day there” and the population and birth-rate figures put a pin right on its map); don’t think of the nature of that fog and its power in incredible dilutions like that and just what that stuff had to be; it was Lasvogel’s job to work with that—and anyway, Merrihew genuinely doubted that any wild inspiration of his could even approach Lasvogel’s grasp of the variables involved. Don’t think of ways and means of discovering from Lasvogel himself what it was that was pulling him apart. Superbrain he might be, but Merrihew doubted he was so unlike other human beings as to be always aware of what was wrong with him. He probably didn’t know.

Merrihew liked to work with cross-checkable facts, and with the truth (whatever, from time to time, the hell that might be). In this case he had to work with “metafacts” and treat them as if they were axioms, knowing perfectly well they weren’t. For example, Lasvogel was the only man who could solve the West Ecuador mess. Merrihew doubted that, but could not let that doubt dilute his efforts. And this one: the West Ecuador mess can be solved. Merrihew doubted this too, but must refuse to let that thought into the gears. And this: the difference between Lasvogel’s ability and inability to solve the West Ecuador problem lay in keeping him from falling apart. Merrihew was perfectly aware that Lasvogel might well solve the problem before he, Merrihew did anything; or that he, Merrihew, might pass a miracle and restore Lasvogel to soundness of mind and soul and still Lasvogel might not be able to find an answer.

So all his reasoning and actions must spring from this sequence of assumptions and almost-facts as, if they were the word of God, or at least Moses. On top of which, whatever he did had to be done instantly and effectively, for literally every second made it more likely that the news would get out.

The news would get out....

He stirred uneasily on the bench: he squirmed. Just the fact—no details, no hows or wheres—just the terrible fact that someone had a substance that would secretly and painlessly sterilize everyone on Earth except Caucasians. Who wouldn’t jump at that—jump in horror, in greed, even in joy, in terror? It wouldn’t matter what details were lacking: that which is stated as possible is done. A microscopic amount of uranium is split leaving its

streaks through a half cupful of smoke, and once the news is out, the thing is done—years later, perhaps, billions of dollars, hundreds of thousands of man-hours later, but it gets done and the world is never the same again. A man drops dead, seated at his desk. There is a bullet wound. There is a hole in the window glass. The detective draws a line from a man's head, as he sits at the desk, through the hole. Ballistics experts alter it to the correct parabola and learn where the gun was that fired the shot—and so on—until a murderer is captured. Let it be known that a thing has been done and it will be known how it was done—if anyone cares enough.

And who would care enough about what had happened at West Ecuador? Blacks and bigots. Clever-mouthing haters, masking their diseased passions under a cant of believable ecology. And if a weapon so potent and so selective could be analyzed, why couldn't it be made to select another target? And if that proved impossible, was there any way to measure the rage of the target now established?

Merrihew had a thought—permitted the thought—purely to know he had had it and that he had eliminated it. Take it to the military, to a wealthy bigot, to the potential victims of the most horrifying exercise of genocide known to history—even human history. One might say conscience would dictate something like the last course—as for the others, there would be fortune incalculable, power immeasurable for a man who held what he had and used it for his own ends.

Merrihew shuddered and spat.

Work. Work. Get to work....

He sat there for another twenty minutes.

"For God's sake," he said then. "What a way to save the world."

It was all very discreet, of course, and in the delicate mention of it in Dr. Poole's envelope, the words had all but blushed. The fact sheet held a strange mix of old-world disapproval and latter-day acceptance, combined with an arch appetite for gossip. What it came down to was that Lasvogel had, in addition to a cerebellum, some gonads, and that these had been preoccupied for some time by one Katrin Szabo, expatriate Hungarian, twenty-four years old, a mathematician employed by the Institute and living in the same apartment house on the same floor as Lasvogel. "His association

with Miss Szabo," said the fact sheet primly, "is regarded strictly as Dr. Lasvogel's concern and not the Institute's business"—thereby making it Merrihew's.

What a way to save the world ...

Merrihew, having carefully checked the whereabouts of the parties involved, went to the apartment house where Lasvogel lived, repeating to himself like a mantra: *Lasvogel's privacy must be respected. Lasvogel's privacy must ...* Oh, he didn't give a damn for Lasvogel's privacy. Not now. What the mantra meant was that Lasvogel must not be underestimated. A mind that could do that many things in that many fields was one that would pick up the slightest trace of spying—and that one trace would blow the whole bit. Merrihew could hardly contain West Ecuador in his memory—he most certainly did not want it on his conscience. Anything he did in this operation would have to be by remote control. Anyone he moved or diverted must be handled invisibly and without touching.

In an alley—not the one behind the apartment house—Merrihew became a telephone repairman, locked his car and went into Lasvogel's building through the service entrance. The lock on the fire tower was a simple matter for him. Trudging up eight flights of stairs was not. He used the simple rhythm of climbing to reinforce his mantra.

The eighth-floor hallway was deserted and had an admirably soft carpet. He ghosted up to the door of Apartment 8K and tried the knob, recalling a nightmarish time he had once had picking a lock that wasn't locked. This one was and it was a good one. He glanced at the key slot and from his belt drew out a flat case, opened it. From one side he took out the correct blank and slid it into the slot. From the other side he selected an array of flat blades, chose one, and gently thrust it into the special recess in the blank, applying turning pressures, forward and back, as he did so. His sensitive fingers told him which serration on the blade moved which tumbler and how much. He withdrew the blade and tried another. The third one did it and the door opened. He went in and closed it quietly behind him.

Soundlessly, he whistled.

Nobody, but nobody, could be this neat.

Carefully, avoiding the rugs where possible, he trod the whole place, the whole bare minimal totally efficient place.

Here was where a man could keep his changes of clothes, could wash, could sleep (alone), could eat if he wanted to but usually didn't. Here he apparently did not relax, did not entertain, did not read or watch TV (there was none) and did not even study. Well, a man like Lasvogel probably did all his studying in his head. He didn't need books, and if it was facts he wanted, he had two telephones. The one with no number on it was certainly an open line to the Institute.

Merrihew found nothing out of place, nothing not strictly Lasvogel's, except the note on the dinette table.

It was triangular, blue, dated, and cuter'n hell:

*Welcome, welcome, wherever you
are. Problem: to make perfect
beef Stroganoff exactly as
you like it, without knowing
when you'll come.
Need one ingredient:
Dearest you.
Waiting,*

Leaning over the table to read it without touching it, Merrihew noticed the funny little crossbar on the 7 of the date, European style, and could admire the firm, strong, straight, yet completely feminine handwriting. He backed off a pace to look at the note from a distance. From the way it was placed on the table, he had a strong feeling that it had not been read and tossed there. It had been so carefully centered most likely by the sender, not the receiver.

And the date? Yesterday.

He continued his hands-off inventory: bathroom (where he detected moisture not only on the toothbrush but on the soft bristles of an old-fashioned badger shaving brush) and in the tiny kitchenette, where he made his big find.

It—they, rather, were in the cupboard over the chopping block. The small spice rack contained salt, pepper, seasoned salt, seasoned pepper—and that was all. Beside the rack was an array of vitamin capsules—B complex, glutamic acid and the usual vitamin-mineral once-a-day pill. What faintly caught his eye, just as he turned away, was a glimpse of something stashed behind

the little spice rack.

Feeling that perhaps he was carrying caution to a ludicrous extreme—yet silently chanting his mantra again—Merrihew got out his needle-beam torch and peeked. He had to be mildly acrobatic to be able to read the labels, but what he found was vitamins—two bottles. One was B complex and iron, the other Vitamin E. Unlike the B complex out front, which bore the name of a reputable drugstore chain, these hidden ones were from Let's Live! —one of those natural-food emporia of which Merrihew, a confirmed carnivore, once had said, "They sell fruits and nuts to the nuts and fruits." It happened that he knew this one; it wasn't far from his office.

What the hell was Lazvogel doing in a place like that? And why should he have bought more when he already had had (Merrihew bent to check) two thirds of a bottle of B Complex? And if Lasvogel were simply storing this new bottle—why wasn't the Vitamin E out front?

It looked almost as if he had hidden them.

Resisting the temptation to find out if the bottles really were the genuine article—for the screw-on caps were sealed with shrunk plastic—Merrihew turned away and scanned the counters, the minuscule stove. In the wastebasket was a piece of paper—a small bag with the colophon of the Let's Live! store on it. Merrihew's eye photographed just how it lay before he reached down and took it by the smallest possible corner and lifted it out.

Handwriting.

One of these you really need. So much better for you. Please take them. The other one you don't need at all (!!!) Please take them away!

Love and love

Ruthie

Merrihew replaced the crumpled bag in the wastebasket precisely as he had found it, took one more careful look at the whole place and let himself out.

In the envelope Dr. Poole had given him there was no Ruthie. Hm.

He walked softly down the hall, checking his watch. Still plenty of time. He let himself into Apartment 8D rather more quickly.

Apartment 8D was much more to his taste. In its way as well

ordered as Lasvogel's, It was warm, colorful and lived-in—lived-in, too, by someone who could own a green glass pear and the portrait of a smiling collie because they were beautiful and not because they did anything. The kitchenette was no longer than Lasvogel's but marvelously equipped and organized. The bed could sleep two and the presence of drapes and spreads, rugs and cushions had eliminated that acoustically-live effect Lasvogel's place generated, wherein one's very thoughts echoed and there was nothing to absorb a human error. Merrihew, while retaining his detachment, could not control the thought that if Lasvogel was throwing this away he ought to have his glands candled.

Against one wall was a drop-leaf table, serving as a desk but ready to be used for meals. It bore at the moment a block of triangular notepaper, blue. He ran a fingertip lightly over its edges and nodded. Practical, too. This was Institute stationery with the letterhead guillotined off (making a square) and cut again on the diagonal, making that charming triangular paper.

A piece of it lay on the desk, a felt-tipped pen next to it. In the strong feminine handwriting he had seen on Lasvogel's table, he read:

*Actually I have no claim on you in
any way, not even in the simple
matter of expecting promises
to be kept, and there is obviously
no reason for me
to oh, damn, what's the
USE ...*

The last words sprawled across the paper—he could see where the violent pen had run clear off onto the table top.

Merrihew's eyebrows twitched. Time was when he might have raised them. This was obviously the end of a long series. The rest should be—ahh.

The wastebasket was half full of them. The ones on top were unruffled, the ones lower down crushed, the ones at the very bottom torn into little bits or twisted into tight little knots.

It must have been a long night.

He sampled the many drafts.

Cheerful: *Hello there! Remember me? I'm the one with the secret*

vice—elaborate beef Stroganoff alone in my room. This could lead to

Indignant: *It may be that there are things in your life far more important than—*

Comic: *HELP! I am a prisoner in a Stroganoff factory!*

Comitragic: *To whom it may concern: I am an orphaned beef Stroganoff. Nobody wants me. My noodles are withered and my gravy cold.*

Tragcomic: *Oh pity the poor mathematician with her shining hair brushed bright and the bed turned down, the wine untouched and the Stroganoff cleaving to the cold old chafing-dish—*

Distraught: *Perhaps I needed this. In no other way could I have learned how much I want you, need you. It's so much more than mutual pleasure and the joy of your nearness. I should be angry but instead I'm grateful, but oh, it hurts—*

Furious: *You rotten bastard, you icy son of a bitch, whatever gave you the idea that you could treat me like—*

Maternal: *Nothing matters if you're all right, my dear. There will be other times—any time you say—or none. If I can help in any way, I'm here. If I can help most by leaving you alone while you work things out, I'll do that. But I am rather desperately worried about you. Please eat.*

“Bastard,” Merrihew murmured as he carefully replaced the papers in the wastebasket.

It must have been a long night.

III

He wondered if she had used her key and how often, “her shining hair brushed bright—” she had run down the hall to that monkish cell, only to find it dark and silent and her welcoming note unread on his table? Had she dozed off some time in the early hours and awakened, stiff and cramped at her writing table, to run down once more and perhaps done as Merrihew had just done—checked the untenanted cot and the damp toothbrush, realizing that Lasvogel had come home in the gray light to wash and change and leave again—smelling probably of another woman’s perfume? Smelling of organic soy sauce and sesame seed, rather. Who the hell was Ruthie?

What was a guy like Lasvogel, with the fate of a whole planet

in his hands, doing with two absolutely superfluous time-consuming body-and-mind-consuming entanglements like this.

Merrihew thought about those organic vitamins.

One of them you need ...

That would be the B complex. These health nuts were ape for B complex and the synthetics just would not do.

... you don't need the other one, but take them anyway.

Oh, boy. There used to be a whole megillah about the language of the flowers, you'd send irises and a rose and a hunk of Queen Anne's lace and it meant I am panting for you, or some such. Nowadays you bring a bottle of pills.

You don't need these (!!!)....

Oh, this Ruthie, she is a cutie. Everyone knows Vitamin E's the wildest thing since the prairie oyster and Spanish fly. Lasvogel, you busy, busy boy, you. So you have a date with this Hungarian slip-stick and her Stroganoff and instead you're out all night with your dish of yogurt and her triple exclamation points—and you with all that homework to do. And you bring home your trophies and hide them because you know the other chick has a key.

And suddenly Merrihew knew what he must do. He knew it as he knew that he must do it absolutely invisibly.

He had not the compunctions, here in Katrin Szabo's apartment, that he had had in Lasvogel's austere environment; yet when he used the telephone he was careful not to move it and to hold the receiver with his handkerchief. He got his number.

“Let’s live!” said the telephone.

“Hey man, amen,” said Merrihew, who hated people who said “man!”

“Is Ruthie there?”

“You mean Ruthie Gordoni.”

“God bless, man.” You just told me what I wanted to know. But Merrihew didn’t say that last part out loud. “Look around and see is she there for me, man.”

A pause, then: “Not here. Wish she was,” the telephone added garrulously. “This is a whole different place when she walks in. Someone said just last night she’s a regular Earth Mother.”

“Far out,” said Merrihew, who hated people who say “far out.” “She’s the one turned me on to your B and liver. I wanted to find her and thank her, man. I’m really somebody different, man.”

“That’s Ruthie,” said the telephone with pride and joy. “Well

she lives right across the street, so she'll be in. Who shall I say—"

"I'll fall by myself soon, man. I'm almost out of pork fat molasses anyway."

"Blackstrap."

"That's what I said, man. So later, man."

"Right on," said the telephone fashionably and Merrihew hung up. He glared sourly at it. "Far goddam out, man," he murmured and went looking for the phone book.

He found what he wanted and then, pausing only long enough to check out the whole place for his spoor and finding none, he let himself out and returned through the deserted hall way to Lasvogel's door, which he now opened in even less time than he had the girl's. He was there only long enough to fish the Let's Live! bag out of the wastepaper basket and, in an absolutely perfect copy of her handwriting, add the earth mother's last name and street address to her arch little note. He did not, however, put it back. He left it on the floor beside the basket. In that environment it shouted, it screamed, it stood out like an oil-spill on a talcum beach.

He went back to his office and called Dr. Poole. "Finished," he told that startled gentleman. "I got to tell you this: he'll get worse before he gets better—and if you try to do anything about it you'll screw everything up. And if you call me to tell me bad things have happened to him I'll just say I know, I know."

Dr. Poole said, "But—"

Merrihew was already saying, "Goodbye."

He then went where phones couldn't reach him for a while.

What a way to save the world.

The waiter went away with the order and Merrihew shot a look at Dr. Poole. He looked older, a little, though it had been barely three weeks since the last time. He also looked a hell of a lot happier.

"I can't tell you exactly what he did, of course," said Dr. Poole.

Merrihew nodded understandingly.

"Secrets, secrets," he said.

"Nonsense, man! There are two kinds of secrets—the security kind, where someone mustn't find out something or you'll get hurt—and the other kind, where you're expected to explain polymer transformations to a four-year-old. You just can't. So as

one four-year-old to another, I can merely bumble to you about DNA analogs, a chemical integument forming temporarily around ripe ova, selectivity rather like the clumping that forms sickle cells—and an overlooked environmental factor.”

“You mean there’s no smog in West Ecuador.”

“Jesus! How did you know that?”

“You told me. Most of it at lunch that time. I mean, West Ecuador could only be one place in the whole world, from what you told me. And now you mentioned ‘an overlooked environmental factor.’”

“Ah. Ah.” Dr. Poole nodded vehemently. “Good thing we—he cleared it up as soon as he did. Anyway, it’s reformulated completely and if anyone should ever make the same mistake again we can straighten it out in a matter of hours. To put it as simply as possible, we now have something which nullifies conception in any warm-blooded vertebrate—but only for the current cycle. It doesn’t affect the cycle either and it has no side effects. It can be taken as an individual dose or fogged—the way we did it at West Ecuador—to affect millions. We can bend the population curve downward anywhere—to any degree.”

“And now who gets it? Government? U.N.? Or just you?”

“You don’t want to know that.”

“You’re right.”

The drinks came. Rather happily they silently toasted one another. “Now,” said Dr. Poole, “tell me. How did you do it? Matter of fact, what did you do?”

“Maybe I should keep my secrets, too.”

“There are two kinds of secrets,” Dr. Poole reminded him.

Most uncharacteristically, Merrihew laughed. He did not do it very well. Not enough practice. “*Touché*. Uh—I drew a hell of a slice out of that account you set up. I wouldn’t want you to regret paying out all that money for the little I did.”

Dr. Poole waved that away. “There’s an old story about a mechanic who fixed a big rotary printing press by going inside and whacking something once with a hammer. He billed for \$2500.25, and when they asked for an accounting and itemization, he said the quarter was for whacking it with the hammer. The \$2500 was for knowing where to whack.”

“Goddam,” said Merrihew. “I was going to tell you that very same story.”

“Tell me what you did.”

“I studied your envelope pretty carefully. Your Lasvogel shows an interesting pattern. He’s a multi talented man—and I don’t think his talents are completely under his conscious control. Some people blow up under stress. Some people sharpen up. Lasvogel sharpens. The tougher the problem—and/or the more urgent—the sharper he gets. The West Ecuador problem could hardly have been tougher or more urgent. Every second it got more so. Lasvogel, I think, began to get a little frantic. I think that maybe for the first time in his life he began to feel that the problem wasn’t going to produce enough pressure to squeeze out an answer. It began to show.”

“Oh, it did,” breathed Dr. Poole.

Merrihew said, “I don’t for a minute believe that Lasvogel consciously realized why he then did what he did. Which was to go out and get himself another chick.”

The waiter came, puttered, chuntered and ultimately went away, during which whole time Dr. Poole frowned unseeingly at the puttering and chuntering.

“I suppose,” he said when they were private again, “that he needed to get his mind off the—”

“He got a new chick without getting rid of the old one,” said Merrihew. “There is in all the world no more certain way for a man to get himself into trouble than that. There’s no more efficient method for a man to complicate things for himself, to face more unpredictable and unmanageable hassle.”

“And you were able to stop it.”

“Haven’t you been listening? My God, you know him better than I do or ever will! Lasvogel has total confidence in his ability and he had total devotion to the West Ecuador problem. I mean he knew the answer was in there somewhere and he knew he wasn’t getting enough pressure out of the work. Even if it was about to squash him flat it still wasn’t enough to make the answer come. So he just went out and bought more pressure.”

“Without knowing why?”

“I really don’t think so,” said Merrihew. “Consciously knowing it would make it game-playing, not real—and the pressures then wouldn’t be real either. Which is why playing tricks on yourself never works.”

"Incredible. So—what did you do?"

"Nothing essential. What happened was inevitable, so in a way you didn't need me at all. On the other hand, I did make the inevitable happen a hell of a lot sooner, which is why you got your problem solved when you did."

"Why we got it solved, period," Dr. Poole asserted warmly. "Lasvogel was at the bitter end, believe me."

"You'd know," conceded Merrihew. "I don't—I never saw the guy. Or the chicks. That was the only real trouble I had—making it happen without touching anybody. So I just did what you scientist types called bringing in a force or factor which is necessary and sufficient. I saw to it that the two girls got to know each other. I knew your Miss Szabo was due home before Lasvogel, and that she would sit down and brood a bit, that she would get mad and barge into his place—and that she would not only see the evidence I left for her but would snatch it up and take it away with her."

"What evidence?"

"The other woman's name and address."

"But how would that guarantee—"

"It was guaranteed, if you know Miss Szabo."

"You seem to have gotten to know her quite well."

"Never saw her," said Merrihew, watching, behind his eyes, a succession of careful blue triangles, lines of strong, angry, devoted, injured handwriting. "But in a way you're right. I knew she'd go straight there and have it out."

"What happened?"

"We'll never know. Whatever it was, Lasvogel walked in on it."

"That must have been the night he limped into the lab with the scratches on his face and the big bruise on his cheekbone."

"Language of love," said Merrihew. "One of 'em."

"And by morning he had the new formulation."

"Pressure enough," said Merrihew, spreading his hands in a Q.E.D. gesture. "Necessary and sufficient."

"Oh, dear," said Dr. Poole thoughtfully.

"What is it?!"

"I can't complain, I suppose. I said before—you heard me—that if Lasvogel solved this one he could retire with honor. In effect he probably has—and we won't be getting much from him from now on."

“Why?”

Dr. Poole leaned forward with his I-don’t-gossip-but-you-should-know expression. “This wouldn’t be a Miss Ruth Gordoni?”

“No,” said Merrihew. “Ruthie.”

“Ah. Well, Lasvogel has moved, you know. Taken a house. And according to my sources Miss Szabo has moved in with him. And, ah, Miss Gordoni also. They seem to have become fast friends, all three.”

And Merrihew really did laugh, this time. “Friend,” he said, putting his hand on Dr. Poole’s shoulder, “You’re going to get work out of Lasvogel like you never got before. And he’s still got a lot to do if the totalitarian principle of physics inherent in this mess is to be kept permanently at bay. It goes something like this: ‘Anything not forbidden is compulsory....’ He’s found a way to keep the pressure on and an environment that won’t even let him get sick. Beef Stroganoff with Vitamin E sauce—” and he dissolved into laughter again and wouldn’t explain.

The Verity File

CONFIDENTIAL:
AUTHORIZED EYES ONLY

ETHICOLOSSUS INC.
Office of the Director of Research
Interoffice Memo

To: Albert Verity, M.D.
Assistant to the Director

An examination of requisitions on file indicates the use of equipment and materials not readily explained by the nature of projects under development in your laboratory. I am, of course, quite certain that these requisitions are justified, but a word of explanation would be appreciated. Should you wish more specific information as to which requisitions are referred to, I shall supply it.

Geoffrey Quest-Profilette, M.D.
Director of Research

cc: Samuel Rebate, M.D.
President

P.S. by hand. *Prexy's boy Uriah Legree (did you know he always calls our president Prexy?) has been snooping, hence the copy to the Old Man. Sorry. But what the hell are you doing with a hard-vacuum still? I'll try to cover for you but you cover for me—for not keeping an eye on you.* G. Q.-P.

ETHICOLOSSUS, INC.
Interoffice Memo
SEALED: PERSONAL

To: Geoffrey Quest-Profilette, M.D.
Damn it, Geoff, of all times for you to be away at The Ethical Drug Convention! All I can do is write this informally and hope

that when you get back you'll come straight down here and let me show you the biggest breakthrough in the history of the company. Company, hell—the biggest thing since the scalpel was invented. Hang tight, boss. Fend off Prexy and his snooper for a little while longer while I get it written up and he'll forgive you—and therefore me—everything.

Just to whet your curiosity, though, let me tell you that my latest requisition is for more mice, lot A64 and L073. In case it's slipped your mind what these are, the first is Malignancies, inherited, and the second is Carcinoma, induced. The previous three lots of each group are cured—remitted—normal. I mean 100%, Geoff—and I mean overnight, every time. And the seven litters I have so far from the first lot—and one from the second, check out normal.

I know as well as anybody does how careful everyone has to be, and how much time and cross-checking we have to go through, but I'm telling you—this stuff is a one-shot, overnight cure not only for lesions but for systemic metastasization. You don't believe this as you read it and I don't expect you to, so get down here and I'll show you.

And by the way—before you get to polishing up a medal for me —this isn't my discovery. All I'm doing is repeating the procedures of the guy who did discover it and I'm going to see to it that he gets the credit for it. My results-of-record extend back three months. His go back four years. So hurry back and get your thing down here.

Al

P.S. It also cures warts.

P.P.S. The discoverer is Max Orloff. He's a neighbor and a friend of mine.

P.P.P.S. On second thought, I'll include photocopies of my results. Did I mention what the raw materials cost? Nothing.

P.P.P.P.S. If I sound a little manic—wouldn't you?

A.V.

Last and ultimate and blockbuster P.S. because *I'll* bust wide open if I don't tell somebody, even if I put my life in your hands. Aunt Mollie gave a party last Saturday and cooked one of her legendary feasts—for thirty people. She spent the whole day before—and most of the night—cooking. And the day before that shopping.

A.V.

ETHICOLOSSUS, INC.
Interoffice Memo

To: Albert Verity, M.D.
 Assistant to the Director

Just a word to acknowledge your efforts during my visit to your laboratory. You will of course assign my lack of response to a deeply ingrained caution—the caution so necessary to all of us in the ethical drug trade. Above all the stature and reputation of the firm must be maintained and I am sure you will observe the same kind of caution. As I predicted, the requisitions in question are quite justified. Hereafter, however, it would be appreciated if you would report any new directions in research to this office before the fact. Keep up the good work.

Geoffrey Quest-Profitte, M.D.
Director of Research

cc: Samuel Rebate, M.D.
 President

P.S. by hand. *You recognize this as a slap on the wrist, very light because of the results. For God's sake don't talk about this on the outside—it could start riots. Matter of fact, don't talk about it on the inside either. As for your Aunt Mollie—I almost fainted. That I don't want talked about again—even to me. You took a terrible chance there and I for one am going to forget it. Sometimes you scare me, Al. A good thing I can be trusted.*

G.

ETHICOLOSSUS, INC.
Office of the President

CONFIDENTIAL

To: Geoffrey Quest-Profitte, M.D.
 Director of Research.

I very much appreciate your sending me your interoffice correspondence with Dr. Verity. It was no more than your duty. I suggest to you—knowing it is hardly necessary—just what you

suggested to Dr. Verity. We'd best keep this in the family. I am certainly going to keep it to myself. By the way—I fail to comprehend the reference to "Aunt Mollie." Can you elucidate?

Endorsement: I totally agree with you, Dr. Rebate, that the Verity file falls into my province as Director of Security.

In response to your request for suggestions, I think that first of all, Dr. Verity must be isolated—without his knowing it. I would suggest a security examination of his laboratory and papers each night after hours—and that the mailroom be alerted so that his correspondence interoffice and outside (God forbid) can be examined. His telephone can easily be put on delay—as is done on radio talk-shows—and monitored so that before an incautious word gets out of the building it can be cut. I think that to stop his work or to divert it would only alert him. Meanwhile I think an outside investigation of this Orloff person (that name has a bad ring to it, Doctor) is indicated, together with the nature of his relationship with Dr. Verity.

Who is Aunt Mollie?

Howlan Beagle, Col. (Ret.)
Director of Security

Endorsement: The one thing that strikes me is Dr. Verity's statement that the raw material "costs nothing." Can you get me a nontechnical description of this "nothing"? I don't believe it, of course, unless it's a figure of speech. But it worries me. Makes it too easy for the competition to undersell us once they analyze the product.

Tip Turner
Director of Sales

Endorsement: I appreciate a look at this file. I wouldn't say that at this stage the matter is in my department, but unless we are extremely cautious it might well be—and a nightmare to boot. I, too, very much doubt that this Orloff has anything—or Dr. Verity either—but the matter should be investigated. I will be glad to go with whoever investigates this person. He may require some handling. Let me know.

Genteel Flack
Director of Public Relations

ETHICOLOSSUS, INC.
Interoffice Memo

To: Albert Verity, M.D.
Can you give me a brief description of the process you used to produce the serum you used on those mice? You know the one I mean. Never mind the technicalities.
Geoffrey Quest-Profitte, M.D.
Director of Research.
P.S. by hand. *Seal your response.*
G. Q.-P.

Interoffice Memo.

To: Geoffrey Quest-Profitte, M.D.
Director of Research

Sure. You start with the spore of *Mucor Mucedo*. What you want is the endospore, but you don't have to excavate for it. Just let it develop the germ tube and nip it off before it branches. Stick these in your bell jar or whatever you're using for a quick hard vacuum and freeze-dry it. You'll get an aqueous vapor that can be bubbled through distilled water until it saturates. Run it into your still. What comes out of the top pipe you can throw away. Same with the bottom. The one in the middle is what you call the serum, though I wouldn't—it's an aromatic extract. Does that answer your question?

A.V.

Interoffice Memo

To: The President
Here is Turner's question which mightily impressed me; that man knows his trade—and Dr. Verity's answer. For our Sales Manager's information (not yours, of course) *Mucor Mucedo* is the common black mold, found in soil practically everywhere. The endospore is just what the word says—the inner white substance of the spore. The germ tubes grow out of the spore, which cracks open its black rind to let it out. Precisely what happens in that sort of distillation I can't say without an analytical series.

It is, as Turner suggested, rather alarmingly simple and inexpensive. Shall I suggest to Dr. Verity that he try to synthesize it?

Geoffrey Quest-Profitte, M.D.
Director of Research

ETHICOLOSSUS, INC.
Office of the President
Interoffice Memo

To: Geoffrey Quest-Profitte, M.D.
Director of Research

Good thinking!
Samuel Rebate, M.D.
President

Interoffice Memo

To: Geoffrey Quest-Profitte
Director of Research
Good thinking!
Tip Turner
Director of Sales

Interoffice Memo
SEALED: PERSONAL

Geoff, what in God's name is wrong with the people upstairs? Synthesize it? Sure I can synthesize it. It'll take twenty-two steps and thousands of dollars worth of equipment and time and who knows if the final distillate will do the same thing? Okay, okay—I'll get to it (though better not let Prexy's boy find out about the requisitions it's going to take) because after all I only work here. But why on earth synthesize something that's so easy to come by already? Are we going to price life-saving right out of the market? Sometimes I fail to see the humor in the ethical drug business. Or the ethics either. Don't mind me, Geoff. I'm just

blowing off steam. You'll get your goddam synthesis. Thanks for the private shoulder.

Disgustedly,

Al

Endorsement: Hardly a loyal attitude, that.

Howlan Beagle, Colonel (Ret.)

Director of Security

From the desk of:

Uriah Legree

Assistant to the President

Picked up Mr. Flack at prearranged time, 8:00 A.M. Tuesday, driving personal car. Arrived vicinity Orloff residence shortly after 9:00. After considerable excursions up and down unfashionable streets without success, queried local gas station, asking for Max Orloff. Attendant, Grand ol' Opry type, overalls, old straw hat even, cigar stub interfering with diction, said Balzac, Baldaz, Boldass or Bolaz? —difficult to tell which and not understandable until later. Mr. Flack said again, Max Orloff and the native said, Yeah, that's ol' Baldaz (or Balzac or some such) and gave explicit directions.

House on top of hill behind screen of trees—three, four acres cultivated, garden vegetables, grapes, cow, duck pond, rabbit hutch. Sign on door WE LIVE WITHOUT CLOTHES. IF THIS MAKES YOU UNCOMFORTABLE PLEASE RING AND WE WILL DRESS. IF NOT, PLEASE KNOCK. Reached for doorbell. Mr. Flack stopped me and knocked, said always take the sucker at his own measure.

Door open, man in his forties wearing hair to shoulders, beard period. Waved us in asking nothing. Big room, beams, fireplace, loom. Weaving at loom young woman wearing long yellow hair period. Smiled. Second young woman comes in door at back, suppose kitchen, wearing full skirt long black hair period, says, Oh, hello, I'll get tea. Started to say no. Mr. Flack said, Thanks yes. Man said, That's Joyce, woman at loom, that's Jocelyn. Jocelyn ties off thread, comes to us, kisses Mr. Flack, kisses me just after I caught Mr. Flack's Hold Still signal. Mr. Flack

introduces himself and me and says we're from Ethicolossus. The man acts very glad, says he's Max Orloff. Sit down. Nothing to sit on but great big half-filled bright-colored velvet bags. Mr. Flack sits on one, his weight makes it shape itself like a kind of chair without legs. I try one carefully, lose balance, fall into it, it catches me, sure enough a chair, much too low but comfortable. Orloff says, Jocelyn made them. Jocelyn sits on the floor in front of, between us. Smiles a lot.

Mr. Flack tells Orloff how impressed everyone at Ethicolossus is with him and his work and a lot more about saving the world from misery and pain. Orloff takes it all in as if he believes every word and after a while I think he really does. Mr. Flack doing all talking, slow and easy, Jocelyn says to me Like to see the place? Mr. Flack flashes me a quick nod and Jocelyn gets up and holds out hand. Don't want hand, don't want to go, but Mr. Flack gives signal again and I get up. Jocelyn keeps hand. Very unsettling. Go out through kitchen, brick and iron stove, burning wood I guess. Beams, cast-iron and copper, tile floor. Big. See larder, root cellar, spring house, bedrooms with mattress covering whole floor, twenty cats with names, stories, four dogs, doves. Jocelyn tells how they live off the land, buy only salt, flour, matches and the like, not even sugar, they keep bees. Orloff's lab. Like an alchemist's workshop—lot of stuff usually glass is ceramic. Jocelyn says Joyce makes it.

On the way back in she stops and takes both my hands and says, Oh, please, will Ethicolossus buy Max's discovery? Said I don't know, but maybe. She says, Oh, and tears come into her eyes. Says it's been very hard for a long time. Max could lose the place. It would take such a little bit to let him keep it. Went back in. Joyce has tray with mugs. All go into big room. Mr. Flack and Orloff heads together over papers, Max has Mr. Flack's pen. Joyce says, Tea? I don't want it but Mr. Flack takes his and gives me the look. I take the big mug, guess Joyce made that, too, took a drink. Herbs. Awful. Mr. Flack drank his all up, so me too. Everybody happy enough to make a man puke. We leave, both girls kiss us, afraid Max Orloff might, too.

In car, Mr. Flack laughs all the way down the hill, says, You'd never believe what we got the process for—fifty dollars, a lousy fifty dollars. Only Orloff does not know that and will not until he shows those papers to a lawyer. Told him Orloff about to lose the

place. Mr. Flack said, Good, glad we got there before he moved. Said this world is sharks and minnows and the minnows live to get eaten, that's what they are for.

Dropped off Mr. Flack at Ethicolossus, proceeded to county airport for second part of investigation. Lunched at airport, caught Flight 803 as planned, landed at Breed City 3:18 P.M. Hired car, proceeded to Mollie Verity neighborhood, checked out house. Trees on street made it like tunnel, houses far apart, old-fashioned, gingerbread, porches, porticos, porte cochères. Old but neat, paint bright. Shutters on most, wide lawns, picket fences, flowers. Verity house light gray with green shutters. Drive to corner, candy store. Call. Say I work with Dr. Verity, just passing through. Miss Verity sounds very hospitable. Drive back and park. Little lady bounces off porch glider, meets me halfway up front walk, takes both hands. Different thing from that Jocelyn altogether. Eyes bright as headlights, hair graying but not much and pulled back so tight it hurt into little bun. Apple cheeks really. Looked like all her own teeth. Gingham dress, blue with white polka dots and white collar and white tea apron, looked like that what's-his-name that used to paint *Post* covers. Rockwell. Harder to believe than naked Orloff.

Inside, not a word until lemonade in tall glass with ice and homemade ginger and lemon cookies. Then all about Albert, how is Albert, is he working too hard, does he look peak-ed? Never had to say I don't see Dr. Verity one month to the next. She carried it all.

Have to say if I didn't see this woman myself, couldn't believe both her and the medical report Col. Beagle gave me to read. Report said total terminal, metastasis, gone everywhere, weight less than 80 pounds, delirium to coma. Then spontaneous remission. But all that only months ago, now healthiest little lady around, full of bounce, laughing, always on the move. Said it herself—cancer did her good. Never had so much energy before, nor so much fun.

No trouble at all getting her to talk about it. About Al Verity either. Sun rises and sets on him. Golden boy. Not just family pride, real miracle-worker, all that. Couldn't get her to say what if anything he'd done. She was too far gone to know.

But she said this, she said she came out of the haze and the pain laughing. She says she never felt so good in all her life,

better even than now. She said she saw colors she had never seen before, had no names for them. Shifting, balanced patterns, moving mosaics. Everything part of the colors—sound—click of a spoon, footsteps, airplane—translated into the colors, joined them. Then, dreams—impossible flying and living and feeling dreams, realer than most real things. And all the while feeling great.

Then hungry. Couldn't get enough. Her folks and friends laughed, then got worried. Gained eighteen pounds in three weeks, all of it in the right places, kept on feeling good, so not to worry.

Gave me a piece of fruitcake, says it's Albert's favorite, says that I should give it to him.

Somebody else better do that. At least till he finds out from someone else.

Like my job. Lot of different things to do all the time. Never had a worse morning, though, or a better afternoon. Maybe some day see that lady again.

Expense account attached.

Uriah Legree
Assistant to the President.

Endorsement: I attest to the accuracy of Legree's photographic eye and telegraphic prose. I cannot completely identify with his sketches of me, but then, why cavil? That is not the issue. What is most seriously the issue is that the treatment she had, however she got it or from whom, seems to be psychedelic or at least euphoric. That won't do.

Genteel Flack
Director, Public Relations

Endorsement: What is overridingly important—and I am astonished at the reluctance of both these gentlemen to point it out—is that this Orloff is a nudist with long hair who has an open and irregular arrangement with not one, but two females. I would advise strongly against any association with a person of this sort. One can readily assume what his politics is. There are more kinds of security, apparently, than these gentlemen realize.

Howlan Beagle, Col. (Ret.)
Director of Security

Endorsement: As the long-haired man would doubtless say, the Colonel can cool it. With those signed papers in hand there is no danger of any such association. Dr. Quest-Profitte: when you have read through this, see what you can do about getting the euphoric effect out of the distillate.

Samuel Rebate, M.D.
President

Interoffice Memo

To: Albert Verity, M.D.
Al, I've been studying your diagrams of the aromatic rings in the Orloff distillate, as well as your chromatography charts, and it seems to me that there may possibly be a parallel or analogical similarity between some of these fractions and such compounds as psilocybin. If so, there may be unexpected and certainly unwanted side effects. Will you please check this out for me?
Geoffrey Quest- Profitte, M.D.
Director of Research

Interoffice Memo
SEALED: PERSONAL

To: Geoffrey Quest- Profitte; M.D.
Director of Research

I'm impressed. I really wouldn't have thought you or anyone could have discovered that analogue by the rough reports I sent up, though it is there if you know what to look for. The answer is yes—the stuff gives a tremendous high and I have the happiest mice in the world. If you're worried that people might buy it for that, like glue-sniffers, forget it—it seems to have no effect on anyone but cancer patients. It'll take a lot of testing to prove that out, but it seems to be the case—so much so that I was about to broach the subject of a line of research to investigate the distillate as a diagnostic.

Would you favor such an approach? I believe it would bear

fruit—and, rather quickly, at that.

Work progresses on the synthesis, which I still think is a vast waste of time, but indications are that the synthetic product will work as well as the natural derivative.

By the way, I dropped over to see Orloff the other night and he was in seventh heaven. He showed me the agreements with Ethicoloressus and I find them extremely generous. It's going to make a great deal of difference to a very good man.

Right?

Al

Interoffice Memo

To: Albert Verity M.D.

Al, you'll have to get the euphoric effect right out of the distillate. Dr. Rebate, Mr. Flack, Mr. Turner and I have conferred on the matter and it's unanimous. The thing to shoot for is an effect no more marked than that of the common tranquilizers or so-called psychic energizers. That much would be fine. Can you do it?

The answer to your question re using the Orloff distillate as a diagnostic is, of course, answered by the above.

Geoffrey Quest-Profitte, M.D.

Director of Research

Dear Geoff:

I'm taking advantage of you, I know—and also of a certain symbolism. This is a letter on plain paper and in a plain envelope—for plain talk, for once not under the engraved umbrella of the Ethicoloressus name and image. This is me—Al—the guy downstairs who shovels mouse turds and tries his damnedest to do what he wants in the way you say you want it.

Let me sidle into the subject. Years ago there was a wonderful English humorist, almost forgotten today, whose name was Jerome K. Jerome. He was a very funny man. He was also gentle, quizzical, questioning and bright as hell—one of those rare human beings who was capable of exploring the everyday world as if it were a foreign country, full of strange practices and

heathen idols—which of course it was and is.

Remember one of his simplest, gentlest little essays. It was about baby dresses. In his day—around the turn of the century—it was customary to make dresses about four feet long for infants. He began to wonder about this, as he wondered about everything his eye lit on, so he went to an expert to find an answer. The expert was one of those legendary English nannies pushing a pram in a London park. “Why do babies wear such long dresses?” he asked her, and she replied, just this side of shock: “My goodness, sir! You wouldn’t have them in *short* dresses, would you?”

Now the point of the essay isn’t that she didn’t know and was admitting it. The point is that she did know and that was her answer. Further, it was an answer that absolutely satisfied her, the kind of answer you find at the end of a theorem, or carved on a tablet of stone for Moses.

We’ve run head on into one just like that. You want me to take the “upper” effect out of what I’ll be so incautious as to call a cancer cure. I understand what you’re doing. You’re protecting Ethicoloressus against charges which might be brought against it once the news was out: I’ll concede that they *will* be made when it gets out. But it seems not to have occurred to you that the charges can be refuted—and should be.

First of all there’s a safety factor. I think it will be proved beyond doubt that that euphoric effect will not occur except in the presence of malignancy. But absolutely aside from that—did it ever occur to you to ask, “What’s the matter with sick people feeling good?”

Why is it that morphine is the mainstay in terminal analgesis? You know as well as I do that there are a dozen or a score other drugs which will kill pain as well or better, which are not used simply and solely because they are euphorics. It isn’t a medical issue, it’s a moral one—and it’s the kind of morality that has no place in medicine—not the kind Hippocrates was talking about, nor my kind either. It’s the kind of morality that forced the Chinese doctor to examine his female patients by means of an ivory doll passed through the curtains, marked where it hurt. It’s the kind that made anatomical dissection virtually impossible for over a thousand years.

We don’t give euphorics to dying patients because somehow it’s

wrong for them to go out feeling good. We do a little something to keep them from feeling too bad or from feeling at all—but somehow it's immoral to let them go out happy.

In the case of Orloff's distillate we have to think one step further. Suddenly I see the whole R&D of this amazing substance aborted because patients might feel good—not while they're dying, but while they're getting well!

I'd hate to have to explain that to a man from Mars.

Hey, Geoff—I'm really grateful that I have your shoulder to cry on in private like this. I get frustrated from time to time and this helps.

A1

ETHICOLOSSUS, INC.
Interoffice Memo
SEALED: PERSONAL

To: **Albert Verity, M.D.**
Assistant to the Director

There is very little I can say in response to your good letter, except that I share in your pleasure in this means of making yourself feel better. It seems to me that the proper place and time for investigations into the philosophy and morality of the healing arts is at two in the morning after too much weak beer in one's second year of medical school. These things can hardly be the concern of men of our degree of age and experience, especially not on company time. I will go so far as to point out to you that our function in pharmaceuticals is to serve medical practice, not to alter it. Let physicians make these alterations. When and if they do, we shall accommodate them. We can do no more. We must do no more, Dr. Verity.

I do not think your letter was what, in law, is called a responsive answer to my query as to the possibility of recompounding the Orloff distillate in such wise as to reduce or eliminate the deleterious side effects. Please advise me.

And, of course, continue to feel free to express yourself to me in any way you see fit. It pleases me to have this function.

Geoffrey Quest-Profile, M.D.
Director of Research

Interoffice Memo

To: Geoffrey Quest-Profitte, M.D.
Director of Research.

Please refer to the ring diagrams and chromatograph charts on which you recently commented and from which you so expertly deduced the parallelism of the distillate with certain psychomimetics. These diagrams and charts present a far less subtle statement of the impossibility of making the alteration you suggest. It is analogous to asking a metallurgist to substitute lead for tungsten as a hardening alloy. No matter what the derivation —natural or synthetic—Orloff's distillate will not work without that structure. It is not I who makes this statement, Doctor, but biochemistry.

Albert Verity, M.D.
Assistant to the Director

Endorsement: You smacked him too hard, Geoff. Once he begins to doubt the source of your information about the euphoric effect, he will begin to doubt a great many other things. Better call him off the project before he does.

Samuel Rebate, M.D.
President

Endorsement: Some people just don't know how to handle people. Q.-P-Doll should have cleared it with me.

Genteel Flack
Director, Public Relations

Endorsement: If anyone bothered to ask my advice, I'd have said a long time back, kick him out altogether. Not a good teammate at all. The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.

Howlan Beagle, Col. (Ret.)
Director of Security

Endorsement: The man gives me the creeps. I have this nightmare about our marketing the Orloff thing and it doesn't work. I have

this other nightmare about our marketing it and it does work. And I don't know which is worse. I don't want to say any more than that and don't need to.

Tip Turner
Director of Sales

Endorsement: Don't care what happens. All I know is I got to eat his Aunt Mollie's fruitcake. Great.

Uriah Legree
Assistant to the President

Endorsement: Just leave him to me and don't tell me I can't handle my people.

Geoffrey Quest-Profitte
Director of Research

ETHICOLOSSUS, INC.
Interoffice Memo

To: Albert Verity, M.D.
 Assistant to the Director.

I concur in your conclusion that nothing can be done about the unfortunate side effects inherent in the Orloff distillate. We have therefore concluded that the project had best be shelved. Please collect all files and notes and have them delivered to me, complete and indexed, not later than noon tomorrow. I am making arrangements to have all unnecessary materials, specimens, test animals and equipment removed from your laboratory immediately. You may proceed with the previously authorized projects assigned to you.

Geoffrey Quest-Profitte, M.D.
Director of Research

Interoffice Memo

To: Geoffrey Quest-Profitte, M.D.
 Director of Research
Why don't you square with yourself if not with me? The Orloff

distillate will disappear into the archives (and now I understand why your terms with Max were so generous: they were all contingent on production; now for fifty lousy dollars you've gained all right and title to his discovery) and it is being buried

—because Max Orloff has no medical degree

—because he is a known eccentric

—because the distillate can be easily produced from readily available materials, duplication is likely and profit is small, or

—because a big markup couldn't be concealed.

But mostly because the existence of such a treatment would send shudders through the Big Machine and all its many parts—Ethicolossus, the pharmacists, the doctors, the hospitals, the hospital-supply firms, the "chronic" rest-homes and all their heirs and assigns, cohorts and confederates.

And I quit.

I resign with great joy—not because I am defeated in this project, but because Orloff and his work and his way of life are bigger than anyone's business or career or prestige and I want no part of any of that. You will call me a dropout, but I will go ahead with the healing I was trained for—and with no more dirt on my hands than I get from weeding the eggplant patch. You'll never pin a malpractice on me because I am on to you. The papers Orloff signed are no good to you because Orloff exists and the distillate exists and I exist—and because of that people are just going to get better and they'll pay for it by harvesting tomatoes and chopping wood. And here's one more thing to think about. With Orloff—especially with me and Orloff—there's more where that came from; more products, processes, ideas.

But you don't want to hear any of this. You can't, can you?
Albert Verity, M.D.

Occam's Scalpel

I

Joe Trilling had a funny way of making a living. It was a good living, but of course he didn't make anything like the bundle he could have in the city. On the other hand he lived in the mountains a half mile away from a picturesque village in clean air and piney-birchy woods along with lots of mountain laurel and he was his own boss. There wasn't much competition for what he did; he had his wife and kids around all the time and more orders than he could fill. He was one of the night people and after the family had gone to bed he could work quietly and uninterrupted. He was happy as a clam.

One night—very early morning, really—he was interrupted. Buppup, bump, bump. Knock at the window, two shorts, two longs. He froze, he whirled, for he knew that knock. He hadn't heard it for years but it had been a part of his life since he was born. He saw the face outside and filled his lungs for a whoop that would have roused them at the fire station on the village green, but then he saw the finger on the lips and let the air out. The finger beckoned and Joe Trilling whirled again, turned down a flame, read a gauge, made a note, threw a switch and joyfully but silently dove for the outside door. He slid out, closed it carefully, peered into the dark.

“Karl?”

“Shh.”

There he was, edge of the woods. Joe Trilling went there and, whispering because Karl had asked for it, they hit each other, cursed, called each other the filthiest possible names. It would not be easy to explain this to an extra-terrestrial; it isn't necessarily a human thing to do. It's a cultural thing. It means, I want to touch you, it means I love you; but they were men and brothers, so they hit each other's arms and shoulders and swore despicable oaths and insults, until at last even those words wouldn't do and they stood in the shadows, holding each other's

biceps and grinning and drilling into each other with their eyes. Then Karl Trilling moved his head side-wards toward the road and they walked away from the house.

"I don't want Hazel to hear us talking," Karl said "I don't want her or anyone to know I was here. How is she?"

"Beautiful. Aren't you going to see her at all—or the kids?"

"Yes but not this trip. There's the car. We can talk there. I really am afraid of that bastard."

"Ah," said Joe. "How is the great man?"

"Po'ly," said Karl. "But we're talking about two different bastards. The great man is only the richest man in the world, but I'm not afraid of him, especially now. I'm talking about Cleveland Wheeler."

"Who's Cleveland Wheeler?"

They got into the car. "It's a rental," said Karl. "Matter of fact, it's the second rental. I got out of the executive jet and took a company car and rented another—and then this. Reasonably sure it's not bugged. That's one kind of answer to your question, who's Cleve Wheeler. Other answers would be the man behind the throne. Next in line. Multifaceted genius. Killer shark."

"Next in line," said Joe, responding to the only clause that made any sense. "The old man is sinking?"

"Officially—and an official secret—his hemoglobin reading is four. That mean anything to you, Doctor?"

"Sure does, Doctor. Malnutritive anemia, if other rumors I hear are true. Richest man in the world—dying of starvation."

"And old age—and stubbornness—and obsession. You want to hear about Wheeler?"

"Tell me."

"Mister lucky. Born with everything. Greek coin profile. Michaelangelo muscles. Discovered early by a bright-eyed elementary school, principal, sent to a private school, used to go straight to the teachers' lounge in the morning and say what he'd been reading or thinking about. Then they'd tell off a teacher to work with him or go out with him, or whatever. High school at twelve, varsity track, basketball, football and high-diving—three letters for each—yes, he graduated in three years, summa cum. Read all the textbooks at the beginning of each term, never cracked them again. More than anything else he had the habit of success.

"College, the same thing: turned sixteen in his first semester, just ate everything up. Very popular. Graduated at the top again, of course."

Joe Trilling, who had slogged through college and medical school like a hodcarrier, grunted enviously. "I've seen one or two like, that. Everybody marvels, nobody sees how easy it was for them."

Karl shook his head. "Wasn't quite like that with Cleve Wheeler. If anything was easy for him it was because of the nature of his equipment. He was like a four-hundred horsepower car moving in sixty-horsepower traffic. When his muscles were called on he used them, I mean really put it down to the floor. A very willing guy. Well—he had his choice of jobs—hell, choice of careers. He went into an architectural firm that could use his math, administrative ability, public presence, knowledge of materials, art. Gravitated right to the top, got a partnership. Picked up a doctorate on the side while he was doing it. Married extremely well.

"Mister Lucky," Joe said.

"Mister Lucky, yeah. Listen. Wheeler became a partner and he did his work and he knew his stuff—everything he could learn or understand. Learning and understanding are not enough to cope with some things like greed or unexpected stupidity or accident or sheer bad breaks. Two of the other partners got into a deal I won't bother you with—a high-rise apartment complex in the wrong place for the wrong residents and land acquired the wrong way. Wheeler saw it coming, called them in and talked it over. They said yes-yes and went right ahead and did what they wanted anyway—something that Wheeler never in the world expected. The one thing high capability and straight morals and a good education doesn't give you is the end of innocence. Cleve Wheeler was an innocent.

"Well, it happened, the disaster that Cleve had predicted, but it happened far worse. Things like that, when they surface, have a way of exposing a lot of other concealed rot. The firm collapsed. Cleve Wheeler had never failed at anything in his whole life. It was the one thing he had no practice in dealing with. Anyone with the most rudimentary intelligence would have seen that this was the time to walk away—lie down, even. Cut his losses. But I don't think these things even occurred to him."

Karl Trilling laughed suddenly. "In one of Philip Wylie's novels is a tremendous description of a forest fire and how the animals run away from it, the foxes and the rabbits running shoulder to shoulder, the owls flying in the daytime to get ahead of the flames. Then there's this beetle, lumbering along on the ground. The beetle comes to a burned patch, the edge of twenty acres of hell. It stops, it wiggles its feelers, it turns to the side and begins to walk around the fire—" He laughed again. "That's the special thing Cleveland Wheeler has, you see, under all that muscle and brain and brilliance. If he had to—and were a beetle—he wouldn't turn back and he wouldn't quit. If all he could do was walk around it, he'd start walking."

"What happened?" asked Joe.

"He hung on. He used everything he had. He used his brains and his personality and his reputation and all his worldly goods. He also borrowed and promised—and he worked. Oh, he worked. Well, he kept the firm. He cleaned out the rot and built it all up again from the inside, strong and straight this time. But it cost.

"It cost him time—all the hours of every day but the four or so he used for sleeping. And just about when he had it leveled off and starting up, it cost him his wife."

"You said he'd married well."

"He'd married what you marry when you're a young blockbuster on top of everything and going higher. She was a nice enough girl, I suppose, and maybe you can't blame her, but she was no more used to failure than he was. Only he could walk around it. He could rent a room and ride the bus. She just didn't know how—and of course with women like that there's always the discarded swain somewhere in the wings."

"How did he take that?"

"Hard. He'd married the way he played ball or took examinations—with everything he had. It did something to him. All this did things to him, I suppose, but that was the biggest chunk of it.

"He didn't let it stop him. He didn't let anything stop him. He went on until all the bills were paid—every cent. All the interest. He kept at it until the net worth was exactly what it had been before his ex-partners had begun to eat out the core. Then he gave it away. Gave it away! Sold all right and title to his interest for a dollar."

“Finally cracked, hm?”

Karl Trilling looked at his brother scornfully. “Cracked. Matter of definition, isn’t it? Cleve Wheeler’s goal was zero—can you understand that? What is success anyhow? Isn’t it making up your mind what you’re going to do and then doing it, all the way?”

“In that case,” said his brother quietly, “suicide is success.”

Karl gave him a long penetrating look. “Right,” he said, and thought about it a moment.

“Anyhow,” Joe asked, “why zero?”

“I did a lot of research on Cleve Wheeler, but I couldn’t get inside his head. I don’t know. But I can guess. He meant to owe no man anything. I don’t know how he felt about the company he saved, but I can imagine. The man he became—was becoming—wouldn’t want to owe it one damned thing. I’d say he just wanted out—but on his own terms, which included leaving nothing behind to work on him.”

“Okay,” said Joe.

Karl Trilling thought, *The nice thing about old Joe is that he’ll wait. All these years apart with hardly any communication beyond birthday cards—and not always that—and here he is, just as if we were still together every day. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t important; I wouldn’t be telling him all this unless he needed to know; he wouldn’t need any of it unless he was going to help. All that unsaid—I don’t have to ask him a damn thing. What am I interrupting in his life? What am I going to interrupt? I won’t have to worry about that. He’ll take care of it.*

He said, “I’m glad I came here, Joe.”

Joe said, “That’s all right,” which meant all the things Karl had been thinking. Karl grinned and hit him on the shoulder and went on talking.

“Wheeler dropped out. It’s not easy to map his trail for that period. It pops up all over. He lived in at least three communes—maybe more, but those three were a mess when he came and a model when he left. He started businesses—all things that had never happened before, like a supermarket with no shelves, no canned music, no games or stamps, just neat stacks of open cases, where the customer took what he wanted and marked it according to the card posted by the case, with a marker hanging on a string. Eggs and frozen meat and fish and the like, and local produce were priced a flat two percent over wholesale. People

were honest because they could never be sure the checkout counter didn't know the prices of everything—besides, to cheat on the prices listed would have been just too embarrassing. With nothing but a big empty warehouse for overhead and no employees spending thousands of man hours marking individual items, the prices beat any discount house that ever lived. He sold that one, too, and moved on. He started a line of organic baby foods without preservatives, franchised it and moved on again. He developed a plastic container that would burn without polluting and patented it and sold the patent."

"I've heard of that one. Haven't seen it around, though."

"Maybe you will," Karl said in a guarded tone. "Maybe you will. Anyway, he had a CPA in Pasadena handling details, and just did his thing all over. I never heard of a failure in anything he tried."

"Sounds like a junior edition of the great man himself, your honored boss."

"You're not the only one who realized that. The boss may be a ding-a-ling in many ways, but nobody ever faulted his business sense. He has always had his tentacles out for wandering pieces of very special manpower. For all I know he had drawn a bead on Cleveland Wheeler years back. I wouldn't doubt that he'd made offers from time to time, only during that period Cleve Wheeler wasn't about to go to work for anyone that big. His whole pattern is to run things his way, and you don't do that in an established empire."

"Heir apparent," said Joe, reminding him of something he had said earlier.

"Right," nodded Karl. "I knew you'd begin to get the idea before I was finished."

"But finish," said Joe.

"Right. Now what I'm going to tell you, I just want you to know, I don't expect you to understand it or what it means or what it has all done to Cleve Wheeler. I need your help, and you can't really help me unless you know the whole story."

"Shoot."

Karl Trilling shot: "Wheeler found a girl. Her name was Clara Prieta and her folks came from Sonora. She was bright as hell—in her way, I suppose, as bright as Cleve though with a tenth of his schooling—and pretty as well, and it was Cleve she wanted, not

what he might get for her. She fell for him when he had nothing—when he really wanted nothing. They were a daily, hourly joy to each other. I guess that was about the time he started building this business and that, making something again. He bought a little house and a car. He bought two cars, one for her. I don't think she wanted it, but he couldn't do enough—he was always looking for more things to do for her. They went out for an evening to some friend's house, she from shopping, he from whatever it was he was working on then, so they had both cars. He followed her on the way home and had to watch her lose control and spin out. She died in his arms."

"Oh, Jesus."

"Mister Lucky. Listen: a week later he turned a corner downtown and found himself looking at a bank robbery. He caught a stray bullet—grazed the back of his neck. He had seven months to lie still and think about things. When he got out he was told his business manager had embezzled everything and headed south with his secretary. Everything."

"What did he do?"

"Went to work and paid his hospital bill!"

They sat in the car in the dark for a long time, until Joe said, "Was he paralyzed, there in the hospital?"

"For nearly five months."

"Wonder what he thought about."

Karl Trilling said, "I can imagine what he thought about. What I can't imagine is what he decided. What he concluded. What he determined to be. Damn it, there are no accurate words for it. We all do the best we can with what we've got, or try to. Or should. He did—and with the best possible material to start out with. He played it straight; he worked hard; he was honest and lawful and fair; he was fit; he was bright. He came out of the hospital with those last two qualities intact. God alone knows what's happen to the rest of it."

"So he went to work for the old man."

"He did—and somehow that frightens me. It was as if all his qualifications were not enough to suit both of them until these things happened to him—until they made him become what he is."

"And what is that?"

"There isn't a short answer to that, Joe. The old man has

become a modern myth. Nobody ever sees him. Nobody can predict what he's going to do or why. Cleveland Wheeler stepped into his shadow and disappeared almost as completely as the boss. There are very few things you can say for certain. The boss has always been a recluse and in the ten years Cleve Wheeler has been with him he has become more so. It's been business as usual with him, of course—which means the constantly unusual—long periods of quiet, and then these spectacular unexpected wheelings and dealings. You assume that the old man dreams these things up and some high-powered genius on his staff gets them done. But it could be the genius that instigates the moves—who can know? Only the people closest to him—Wheeler, Epstein, me. And I don't know."

"But Epstein died."

Karl Trilling nodded in the dark. "Epstein died. Which leaves only Wheeler to watch the store. I'm the old man's personal physician, not Wheeler's, and there's no guarantee that I ever will be Wheeler's."

Joe Trilling recrossed his legs and leaned back, looking out into the whispering dark. "It begins to take shape," he murmured. "The old man's on the way out, you very well might be, and there's nobody to take over but this Wheeler."

"Yes, and I don't know what he is or what he'll do. I do know he will command more power than any single human being on Earth. He'll have so much that he'll be above any kind of cupidity that you or I could imagine—you or I can't think in that order of magnitude. But you see, he's a man who, you might say, has had it proved to him that being good and smart and strong and honest doesn't particularly pay off. Where will he go with all this? And hypothesizing that he's been making more and more of the decisions lately, and extrapolating from that—where is he going? All you can be sure of is that he will succeed in anything he tries. That is his habit."

"What does he want? Isn't that what you're trying to figure out? What would a man like that want, if he knew he could get it?"

"I knew I'd come to the right place," said Karl almost happily. "That's it exactly. As for me, I have all I need now and there are plenty of other places I could go. I wish Epstein were still around, but he's dead and cremated."

“Cremated?”

“That’s right—you wouldn’t know about that. Old man’s instructions, I handled it myself. You’ve heard of the hot and cold private swimming pools—but I bet you never heard of a man with his own private crematorium in the second sub-basement.”

Joe threw up his hands. “I guess if you reach into your pocket and pull out two billion real dollars, you can have anything you want. By the way—was that legal?”

“Like you said—if you have two billion. Actually, the county medical examiner was present and signed the papers. And he’ll be there when the old man pushes off too—it’s all in the final instructions. Hey—wait, I don’t want to cast any aspersions on the M.E. He wasn’t bought. He did a very competent examination on Epstein.”

“Okay—we know what to expect when the time comes. It’s afterward you’re worried about.”

“Right. What has the old man—I’m speaking of the corporate old man now—what has he been doing all along? What has he been doing in the last ten years, since he got Wheeler—and is it any different from what he was doing before? How much of this difference, if any, is more Wheeler than boss? That’s all we have to go on, Joe, and from it we have to extrapolate what Wheeler’s going to do with the biggest private economic force this world has ever known.”

“Let’s talk about that,” said Joe, beginning to smile. Karl Trilling knew the signs, so he began to smile a little, too. They talked about it.

II

The crematorium in the second sub-basement was purely functional, as if all concessions to sentiment and ritual had been made elsewhere, or canceled. The latter most accurately described what had happened when at last, at long long last, the old man died. Everything was done precisely according to his instructions, immediately after he was certifiably dead and before any public announcements were made—right up to and including the moment when the square mouth of the furnace opened with a startling clang, a blare of heat, a flare of light—the hue the old-time blacksmiths called straw color. The simple coffin slid rapidly

in, small flames exploding into being on its corners, and the door banged shut. It took a moment for the eyes to adjust to the bare room, the empty greased track, the closed door. It took the same moment for the conditioners to whisk away the sudden smell of scorched soft pine.

The medical examiner leaned over the small table and signed his name twice. Karl Trilling and Cleveland Wheeler did the same. The M.E. tore off copies and folded them and put them away in his breast pocket. He looked at the closed square iron door, opened his mouth, closed it again and shrugged. He held out his hand.

“Good night, Doctor.”

“Good night, Doctor. Rugosi’s outside—he’ll show you out.”

The M.E. shook hands wordlessly with Cleveland Wheeler and left.

“I know just what he’s feeling,” Karl said. “Something ought to be said. Something memorable—end of an era. Like ‘One small step for man—’ ”

Cleveland Wheeler smiled the bright smile of the college hero, fifteen years after—a little less wide, a little less even, a great deal less in the eyes. He said in the voice that commanded, whatever he said, “If you think you’re quoting the first words from an astronaut on the moon, you’re not. What he said was from the ladder, when he poked his boot down. He said, ‘It’s some kind of soft stuff. I can kick it around with my foot.’ I’ve always liked that much better. It was real, it wasn’t rehearsed or memorized or thought out and it had to do with that moment and the next. The M.E. said good night and you told him the chauffeur was waiting outside. I like that better than anything anyone could say. I think he would, too.” Wheeler added, barely gesturing, with a very strong slightly cleft chin, toward the hot black door.

“But he wasn’t exactly human.”

“So they say.” Wheeler half smiled and, even as he turned away, Karl could sense himself tuned out, the room itself become of secondary importance—the next thing Wheeler was to do, and the next and the one after, becoming more real than the here and now.

Karl put a fast end to that.

He said levelly, “I meant what I just said, Wheeler.”

It couldn't have been the words, which by themselves might have elicited another half-smile and a forgetting. It was the tone, and perhaps the "Wheeler." There is a ritual about these things. To those few on his own level, and those on the level below, he was Cleve. Below that he was mister to his face and Wheeler behind his back. No one of his peers would call him mister unless it was meant as the herald of an insult; no one of his peers or immediate underlings would call him Wheeler at all, ever. Whatever the component, it removed Cleveland Wheeler's hand from the knob and turned him. His face was completely alert and interested. "You'd best tell me what you mean, Doctor."

Karl said, "I'll do better than that. Come." Without gestures, suggestions or explanations he walked to the left rear of the room, leaving it up to Wheeler to decide whether or not to follow. Wheeler followed.

In the corner Karl rounded on him. "If you ever say anything about this to anyone—even me—when we leave here, I'll just deny it. If you ever get in here again, you won't find anything to back up your story." He took a complex four-inch blade of machined stainless steel from his belt and slid it between the big masonry blocks. Silently, massively, the course of blocks in the corner began to move upward. Looking up at them in the dim light from the narrow corridor they revealed, anyone could see that they were real blocks and that to get through them without that key and the precise knowledge of where to put it would be a long-term project.

Again Karl proceeded without looking around, leaving go, no-go as a matter for Wheeler to decide. Wheeler followed. Karl heard his footsteps behind him and noticed with pleasure and something like admiration that when the heavy blocks whooshed down and seated themselves solidly behind them, Wheeler may have looked over his shoulder but did not pause.

"You've noticed we're alongside the furnace," Karl said, like a guided-tour bus driver. "And now, behind it."

He stood aside to let Wheeler pass him and see the small room. It was just large enough for the tracks which protruded from the back of the furnace and a little standing space on each side. On the far side was a small table with a black suitcase standing on it. On the track stood the coffin, its corners carboned, its top and sides wet and slightly steaming.

"Sorry to have to close that stone gate that way," Karl said matter-of-factly. "I don't expect anyone down here at all, but I wouldn't want to explain any of this to persons other than yourself."

Wheeler was staring at the coffin. He seemed perfectly composed, but it was a seeming. Karl was quite aware of what it was costing him.

Wheeler said, "I wish you'd explain it to me." And he laughed. It was the first time Karl had ever seen this man do anything badly.

"I will. I am." He clicked open the suitcase and laid it open and flat on the little table. There was a glisten of chrome and steel and small vials in little pockets. The first tool he removed was a screwdriver. "No need to use screws when you're cremating 'em," he said cheerfully and placed the tip under one corner of the lid. He struck the handle smartly with the heel of one hand and the lid popped loose. "Stand this up against the wall behind you, will you?"

Silently Cleveland Wheeler did as he was told. It gave him something to do with his muscles; it gave him the chance to turn his head away for a moment; it gave him a chance to think—and it gave Karl the opportunity for a quick glance at his steady countenance.

He's a mensch, Karl thought. He really is....

Wheeler set up the lid neatly and carefully and they stood, one on each side, looking down into the coffin.

"He—got a lot older," Wheeler said at last.

"You haven't seen him recently."

"Here and in there," said the executive. "I've spent more time in the same room with him during the past month than I have in the last eight, nine years. Still, it was a matter of minutes, each time."

Karl nodded understandingly. "I'd heard that. Phone calls, any time of the day or night, and then those long silences two days, three, not calling out, not having anyone in—"

"Are you going to tell me about the phony oven?"

"Oven? Furnace? It's not a phony at all. When we've finished here it'll do the job, all right."

"Then why the theatricals?"

"That was for the M.E. Those papers he signed are in sort of a

never-never country just now. When we slide this back in and turn on the heat they'll become as legal as he thinks they are."

"Then why—"

"Because there are some things you have to know." Karl reached into the coffin and unfolded the gnarled hands. They came apart reluctantly and he pressed them down at the sides of the body. He unbuttoned the jacket, laid it back, unbuttoned the shirt, unzipped the trousers. When he had finished with this, he looked up and found Wheeler's sharp gaze, not on the old man's corpse, but on him.

"I have the feeling," said Cleveland Wheeler, "that I have never seen you before."

Silently Karl Trilling responded: *But you do now. And, Thanks, Joey. You were dead right.* Joe had known the answer to that one plaguing question, *How should I act?*

Talk just the way he talks, Joe had said. *Be what he is, the whole time...*

Be what he is. A man without illusions (they don't work) and without hope (who needs it?) who has the unbreakable habit of succeeding. And who can say it's a nice day in such a way that everyone around snaps to attention and says: *Yes, SIR!*

"You've been busy," Karl responded shortly. He took off his jacket, folded it and put it on the table beside the kit. He put on surgeon's gloves and slipped the sterile sleeve off a new scalpel. "Some people scream and faint the first time they watch a dissection."

Wheeler smiled thinly. "I don't scream and faint." But it was not lost on Karl Trilling that only then, at the last possible moment, did Wheeler actually view the old man's body. When he did he neither screamed nor fainted; he uttered an astonished grunt.

"Thought that would surprise you," Karl said easily. "In case you were wondering, though, he really was a male. The species seems to be oviparous. Mammals too, but it has to be oviparous. I'd sure like a look at a female. That isn't a vagina. It's a cloaca."

"Until this moment," said Wheeler in a hypnotized voice, "I thought that 'not human' remark of yours was a figure of speech."

"No, you didn't," Karl responded shortly.

Leaving the words to hang in the air, as words will if a speaker has the wit to isolate them with wedges of silence, he deftly slit

the corpse from the sternum to the pubic symphysis. For the first-time viewer this was always the difficult moment. It's hard not to realize viscerally that the cadaver does not feel anything and will not protest. Nerve-alive to Wheeler, Karl looked for a gasp or a shudder; Wheeler merely held his breath.

"We could spend hours—weeks I imagine, going into the details," Karl said, deftly making a transverse incision in the ensiform area, almost around to the trapezoid on each side, "but this is the thing I wanted you to see." Grasping the flesh at the juncture of the cross he had cut, on the left side, he pulled upward and to the left. The cutaneous layers came away easily, with the fat under them. They were not pinkish, but an off-white lavender shade. Now the muscular striations over the ribs were in view. "If you'd palpated the old man's chest," he said, demonstrating on the right side, "you'd have felt what seemed to be normal human ribs. But look at this."

With a few deft strokes he separated the muscle fibers from the bone on a mid-costal area about four inches square, and scraped. A rib emerged and, as he widened the area and scraped between it and the next one, it became clear that the ribs were joined by a thin flexible layer of bone or chitin.

"It's like baleen—whalebone," said Karl. "See this?" He sectioned out a piece, flexed it.

"My God."

III

"Now look at this." Karl took surgical shears from the kit, snapped through the sternum right up to the clavicle and then across the lower margin of the ribs. Slipping his fingers under them, he pulled upward. With a dull snap the entire ribcage opened like a door, exposing the lung.

The lung was not pink, nor the liverish-brownish-black of a smoker, but yellow—the clear bright yellow of pure sulfur.

"His metabolism," Karl said, straightening up at last and flexing the tension out of his shoulders, "is fantastic. Or was. He lived on oxygen, same as us, but he broke it out of carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and trioxide, and carbon dioxide mostly. I'm not saying he could—I mean he had to. When he was forced to breathe what we call clean air, he could take just so much of it

and then had to duck out and find a few breaths of his own atmosphere. When he was younger he could take it for hours at a time, but as the years went by he had to spend more and more time in the kind of smog he could breathe. Those long disappearances of his, and that reclusiveness—they weren't as kinky as people supposed."

Wheeler made a gesture toward the corpse. "But—what is he? Where—"

"I can't tell you. Except for a good deal of medical and biochemical details, you now know as much as I do. Somehow, somewhere, he arrived. He came, he saw, he began to make his moves. Look at this."

He opened the other side of the chest and then broke the sternum up and away. He pointed. The lung tissue was not in two discreet parts, but extended across the median line. "One lung, all the way across, though it has these two lobes. The kidneys and gonads show the same right-left fusion."

"I'll take your word for it," said Wheeler a little hoarsely. "Damn it, what is it?"

"A featherless biped, as Plato once described homo sap. I don't know what it is. I just know that it is—and I thought you ought to know. That's all."

"But you've seen one before. That's obvious."

"Sure. Epstein."

"Epstein?"

"Sure. The old man had to have a go-between—someone who could, without suspicion, spend long hours with him and hours away. The old man could do a lot over the phone, but not everything. Epstein was, you might say, a right arm that could hold its breath a little longer than he could. It got to him in the end, though, and he died of it."

"Why didn't you say something long before this?"

"First of all, I value my own skin. I could say reputation, but skin is the word. I signed a contract as his personal physician because he needed a personal physician—another bit of window-dressing. But I did precious little doctoring—except over the phone—and nine-tenths of that was, I realized quite recently, purely diversionary. Even a doctor, I suppose, can be a trusting soul. One or the other would call and give a set of symptoms and I'd cautiously suggest and prescribe. Then I'd get another call that

the patient was improving and that was that. Why, I even got specimens—blood, urine, stools—and did the pathology on them and never realized that they were from the same source as what the medical examiner checked out and signed for.”

“What do you mean, same source?”

Karl shrugged. “He could get anything he wanted—anything.”

“Then—what the M.E. examined wasn’t”—he waved a hand at the casket.

“Of course not. That’s why the crematorium has a back door. There’s a little pocket sleight-of-hand trick you can buy for fifty cents that operates the same way. This body here was inside the furnace. The ringer—a look-alike that came from God knows where; I swear to you I don’t—was lying out there waiting for the M.E. When the button was pushed the fires started up and that coffin slid in—pushing this one out and at the same time drenching it with water as it came through. While we’ve been in here, the human body is turning to ashes. My personal private secret instructions, both for Epstein and for the boss, were to wait until I was certain I was alone and then come in here after an hour and push the second button, which would slide this one back into the fire. I was to do no investigations, ask no questions, make no reports. It came through as logical but not reasonable, like so many of his orders.” He laughed suddenly. “Do you know why the old man—and Epstein too, for that matter, in case you never noticed—wouldn’t shake hands with anyone?”

“I presumed it was because he had an obsession with germs.”

“It was because his normal body temperature was a hundred and seven.”

Wheeler touched one of his own hands with the other and said nothing.

When Karl felt that the wedge of silence was thick enough he asked lightly, “Well, boss, where do we go from here?”

Cleveland Wheeler turned away from the corpse and to Karl slowly, as if diverting his mind with an effort.

“What did you call me?”

“Figure of speech,” said Karl and smiled. “Actually, I’m working for the company—and that’s you. I’m under orders, which have been finally and completely discharged when I push that button—I have no others. So it really is up to you.”

Wheeler’s eyes fell again to the corpse. “You mean about him?

This? What we should do?"

"That, yes. Whether to burn it up and forget it—or call in top management and an echelon of scientists. Or scare the living hell out of everyone on Earth by phoning the papers. Sure, that has to be decided, but I was thinking on a much wider spectrum than that."

"Such as—"

Karl gestured toward the box with his head. "What was he doing here, anyway? What has he done? What was he trying to do?"

"You'd better go on," said Wheeler; and for the very first time said something in a way that suggested diffidence. "You've had a while to think about all this. I—" and almost helplessly, he spread his hands.

"I can understand that," Karl said gently. "Up to now I've been coming on like a hired lecturer and I know it. I'm not going to embarrass you with personalities except to say that you've absorbed all this with less buckling of the knees than anyone in the world I could think of."

"I'll buckle when I have time for it. Just now I'm looking for a way to think this out."

"Right. Well, there's a simple technique you learn in elementary algebra. It has to do with the construction of graphs. You place a dot on the graph where known data put it. You get more data, you put down another dot and then a third. With just three dots—of course, the more the better, but it can be done with three—you can connect them and establish a curve. This curve has certain characteristics and it's fair to extend the curve a little farther with the assumption that later data will bear you out."

"Extrapolation."

"Extrapolation. X-axis, the fortunes of our late boss. Y-axis, time. The curve is his fortunes—that is to say, his influence."

"Pretty tall graph."

"Over thirty years."

"Still pretty tall."

"All right," said Karl. "Now, over the same thirty years, another curve: change in the environment." He held up a hand. "I'm not going to read you a treatise on ecology. Let's be more objective than that. Let's just say changes. Okay: a measurable rise in the

mean temperature because of CO₂ and the greenhouse effect. Draw the curve. Incidence of heavy metals, mercury and lithium, in organic tissue. Draw a curve. Likewise chlorinated hydrocarbons, hypertrophy of algae due to phosphates, incidence of coronaries ... All right, let's superimpose all these curves on the same graph."

"I see what you're getting at. But you have to be careful with that kind of statistics game. Like, the increase of traffic fatalities coincides with the increased use of aluminum cans and plastic-tipped baby pins."

"Right. I don't think I'm falling into that trap. I just want to find reasonable answers to a couple of otherwise unreasonable situations. One is this: if the changes occurring in our planet are the result of mere carelessness—a more or less random thing, carelessness—then how come nobody is being careless in a way that benefits the environment? Strike that. I promised, no ecology lessons. Rephrase: how come all these carelessnesses promote a change and not a preservation?"

"Next question: What is the direction of the change? You've seen speculative writing about 'terraforming'—altering other planets to make them habitable by humans. Suppose an effort were being made to change this planet to suit someone else? Suppose they wanted more water and were willing to melt the polar caps by the greenhouse effect? Increase the oxides of sulfur, eliminate certain marine forms from plankton to whales? Reduce the population by increases in lung cancer, emphysema, heart attacks and even war?"

Both men found themselves looking down at the sleeping face in the coffin. Karl said softly. "Look what he was into—petrochemicals, fossil fuels, food processing, advertising, all the things that made the changes or helped the changers—"

"You're not blaming him for all of it."

"Certainly not. He found willing helpers by the million."

"You don't think he was trying to change a whole planet just so he could be comfortable in it?"

"No, I don't think so—and that's the central point I have to make. I don't know if there are any more around like him and Epstein, but I can suppose this: if the changes now going on keep on—and accelerate—then we can expect them."

Wheeler said, "So what would you like to do? Mobilize the

world against the invader?"

"Nothing like that. I think I'd slowly and quietly reverse the changes. If this planet is normally unsuitable to them, then I'd keep it so. I don't think they'd have to be driven back. I think they just wouldn't come."

"Or they'd try some other way."

"I don't think so," said Karl. "Because they tried this one. If they thought they could do it with fleets of spaceships and super-zap guns, they'd be doing it. No—this is their way and if it doesn't work, they can try somewhere else."

Wheeler began pulling thoughtfully at his lip. Karl said softly, "All it would take is someone who knew what he was doing, who could command enough clout and who had the wit to make it pay. They might even arrange a man's life—to get the kind of man they need."

And before Wheeler could answer, Karl took up his scalpel.

"I want you to do something for me," he said sharply in a new, commanding tone—actually Wheeler's own. "I want you to do it because I've done it and I'll be damned if I want to be the only man in the world who has."

Leaning over the head of the casket, he made an incision along the hairline from temple to temple. Then, bracing his elbows against the edge of the box and steadyng one hand with the other, he drew the scalpel straight down the center of the forehead and down on to the nose, splitting it exactly in two. Down he went through the upper lip and then the lower, around the point of the chin and under it to the throat. Then he stood up.

"Put your hands on his cheeks," he ordered. Wheeler frowned briefly (how long had it been since anyone had spoken to him that way?), hesitated, then did as he was told.

"Now press your hands together and down."

The incision widened slightly under the pressure, then abruptly the flesh gave and the entire skin of the face slipped off. The unexpected lack of resistance brought Wheeler's hands to the bottom of the coffin and he found himself face to face, inches away, with the corpse.

Like the lungs and kidneys, the eyes—eye? —passed the median, very slightly reduced at the center. The pupil was oval, its long axis transverse. The skin was pale lavender with yellow vessels and in place of a nose was a thread-fringed hole. The

mouth was circular, the teeth not quite radially placed; there was little chin.

Without moving, Wheeler closed his eyes, held them shut for one second, two, and then courageously opened them again. Karl whipped around the end of the coffin and got an arm around Wheeler's chest. Wheeler leaned on it heavily for a moment, then stood up quickly and brushed the arm away.

"You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did," said Karl. "Would you want to be the only man in the world who'd gone through that—with nobody to tell it to?"

And after all, Wheeler could laugh. When he had finished he said, "Push that button."

"Hand me that cover."

Most obediently Cleveland Wheeler brought the coffin lid and they placed it.

Karl pushed the button and they watched the coffin slide into the square of flame. Then they left.

Joe Trilling had a funny way of making a living. It was a good living, but of course he didn't make anything like the bundle he could have made in the city. On the other hand, he lived in the mountains a half-mile away from a picturesque village, in clean air and piney-birchy woods along with lots of mountain laurel and he was his own boss. There wasn't much competition for what he did.

What he did was to make simulacra of medical specimens, mostly for the armed forces, although he had plenty of orders from medical schools, film producers and an occasional individual, no questions asked. He could make a model of anything inside, affixed to or penetrating a body or any part of it. He could make models to be looked at, models to be felt, smelled and palpated. He could give you gangrene that stunk or dewy thyroids with real dew on them. He could make one-of-a-kind or he could set up a production line. Dr. Joe Trilling was, to put it briefly, the best there was at what he did.

"The clincher," Karl told him (in much more relaxed circumstances than their previous ones; daytime now, with beer), "the real clincher was the face bit. God, Joe, that was a beautiful piece of work."

"Just nuts and bolts. The beautiful part was your idea—his

hands on it.”

“How do you mean?”

“I’ve been thinking back to that,” Joe said. “I don’t think you yourself realize how brilliant a stroke that was. It’s all very well to set up a show for the guy, but to make him put his hands as well as his eyes and brains on it—that was the stroke of genius. It’s like—well, I can remember when I was a kid coming home from school and putting my hand on a fence rail and somebody had spat on it.” He displayed his hand, shook it. “All these years I can remember how that felt. All these years couldn’t wear it away, all those scrubbings couldn’t wash it away. It’s more than a cerebral or psychic thing, Karl—more than the memory of an episode. I think there’s a kind of memory mechanism in the cells themselves, especially on the hands, that can be invoked. What I’m getting to is that no matter how long he lives, Cleve Wheeler is going to feel that skin slip under his palms and that is going to bring him nose to nose with that face. No, you’re the genius, not me.”

“Na. You knew what you were doing. I didn’t.”

“Hell you didn’t.” Joe leaned far back in his lawn chaise—so far he could hold up his beer and look at the sun through it from the underside. Watching the receding bubbles defy perspective (because they swell as they rise), he murmured, “Karl?”

“Yuh.”

“Ever hear of Occam’s Razor?”

“Um. Long time back. Philosophical principle. Or logic or something. Let’s see. Given an effect and a choice of possible causes, the simplest cause is always the one most likely to be true. Is that it?”

“Not too close, but close enough,” said Joe Trilling lazily. “Hm. You’re the one who used to proclaim that logic is sufficient unto itself and need have nothing to do with truth.”

“I still proclaim it.”

“Okay. Now, you and I know that human greed and carelessness are quite enough all by themselves to wreck this planet. We didn’t think that was enough for the likes of Cleve Wheeler, who can really do something about it, so we constructed him a smog-breathing extra-terrestrial. I mean, he hadn’t done anything about saving the world for our reasons, so we gave him a whizzer of a reason of his own. Right out of our heads.”

"Dictated by all available factors. Yes. What are you getting at, Joe?"

"Oh—just that our complicated hoax is simple, really, in the sense that it brought everything down to a single cause. Occam's Razor slices things down to simplest causes. Single causes have a fair chance of being right."

Karl put down his beer with a bump. "I never thought of that. I've been too busy to think of that. *Suppose we were right?*"

They looked at each other, shaken.

At last Karl said, "What do we look for now, Joe—space ships?"

Dazed

I

I work for a stockbroker on the twenty-first floor. Things have not been good for stockbrokers recently, what with tight money and hysterical reaction to the news and all that. When business gets really bad for a brokerage it often doesn't fail—it merges. This has something to do with the public image. The company I work for is going through the agony. For the lower echelons—me—that means detail you wouldn't believe, with a reduced staff. In other words, night work. Last night I worked without looking up until my whole body was the shape of the chair and there was a blue haze around the edges of everything I could see. I finished a stack and peered at the row of stacks still to be done and tried to get up. It took three tries before my hips and knees would straighten enough to let me totter into the hall and down to the men's room. It never occurred to me to close the office door and I guess the confusion, all the strange faces coming and going for the past few days, extending to the security man downstairs. However it happened, there was a dazed man in my office when I came back a moment later.

He was well dressed—I guess that, too, helped him pass the guards—in a brown sharkskin suit with funny lapels, what you might call up-to-the-minute camp. He wore an orange knitted tie the like of which you only see in a new boutique or an old movie. I'd say he was in his twenties—not yet twenty-five. And dazed.

When I walked in and stopped dead he gave me a lost look and said, "This is my office."

I said the only thing I could think of. "Oh?"

He pivoted slowly all the way around, looking at the desk, the shelves, the files.

When he came around to face me again he said, "This isn't my office."

He had to be with the big five-name brokerage house that was gobbling up my company in its time of need. I asked him.

"No," he said, "I work for *Fortune*."

"Look," I said, "you're not only in the wrong office, you're in the wrong building. Time-Life is on Sixth Avenue—been there since nineteen fifty-two."

"Fifty-two—" He looked around the room again. "But I—but it's —"

He sat down on the settle. I had the idea he'd have collapsed on the floor if the settle hadn't been there. He asked me what day it was. I think I misunderstood.

"Thursday," I said. I looked at my watch. "Well, it's now Friday."

"I mean, what's the date?"

I pointed to the desk calendar right beside him. He looked at it twice, each one a long careful look. I never saw a man turn the color he turned. He covered his eyes. Even his lips went white.

"Oh my God."

"You all right?" I asked—a very stupid question.

"Tell me something," he said after a while. "Has there been a war?"

"You have to be kidding."

He took his hand down and looked at me, so lost, so frightened. Not frightened. There has to be a word. Anguished. He needed answers—needed them. Not questions, not now.

I said, "It's been going on a long time."

"A lot of young guys killed?"

"Upwards of fifty thousand." Something made me add: "Americans. The other side, five, six times that."

"Oh, my God," he said again. Then: "It's my fault."

Now I have to tell you up front that it never occurred to me for one second that this guy was on any kind of a drug trip. Not that I'm an expert, but there are times when you just know. Whatever was bothering him was genuine—at least genuine to him. Besides, there was something about him I had to like. Not the clothes, not the face, just the guy, the kind of guy he was.

I said, "Hey, you look like hell and I'm sick and tired of what I'm doing. Let's take a break and go to the Automat for coffee."

He gave me that lost look again. "Is the lid off on sex? I mean, young kids—"

"Like rabbits," I said. "Also your friendly neighborhood movie—I don't know what they're going to do for an encore." I had to

ask him, "Where've you been?"

He shook his head and said candidly, "I don't know where it was. Are people leaving their jobs—and school—going off to live on the land?"

"Some," I said. "Come on."

I switched off the overhead light, leaving my desk lamp lit. He got to his feet as if he were wired to the switch, but then just stood looking at the calendar.

"Are there bombings?"

"Three yesterday, in Newark. Come on."

"Oh, my God," he said and came. I locked the door and we went down the corridor to the elevators. Air wheezed in the shaft as the elevator rose. "It always whistles like that late at night," he said. I had never noticed that but knew he was right as soon as he said it. He also said weakly, "You don't feel like walking down?"

"Twenty-one flights?"

The doors slid open. The guy didn't want to get in. But I mean, he *really* didn't. I stood on the crack while he screwed up his courage. It didn't take long but I could see it was a mighty battle. He won it and came in, turned around and leaned against the back wall. I pushed the button and we started down. He looked pretty bad. I said something to him but he put up a hand, waved my words away before they were out. He didn't move again until the doors opened and then he looked into the lobby as if he didn't know what to expect. But it was just the lobby, with the oval information desk we called the fishbowl and the shiny floor and the portable wooden desk, like a lectern, where you signed in and out after hours and where the guard was supposed to be. We breezed by it and out into Rockefeller Center. He took a deep breath and immediately coughed.

"What's that smell?"

I'd been about to say something trivial about the one good thing about working late—you could breathe the air, but I didn't say it.

"The smog, I guess."

"Smog. Oh yes, smoke and fog. I remember." Then he seemed to remember something else, something that brought his predicament, whatever it was, back with a hammer blow. "Well of course," he said as if to himself. "Has to be."

On Sixth Avenue (New Yorkers still won't call it Avenue of the

Americas) we passed two laughing couples. One of the girls was wearing a see-through top made of plastic chain mail. The other had on a very maxi coat swinging open over hot pants. My companion was appreciative but not astonished. I think what he said was, "That too—" nodding his head. He watched every automobile that passed and his eyes flicked over the places where they used to sell books and back-date periodicals, every single one of them now given over to peepshows and beaver magazines. He had the same nod of his head for this.

We reached the Automat and it occurred to me that an uncharacteristic touch of genius had made me suggest it. I had first seen the Automat when I had ridden in on my mother's hip more years ago than I'll mention—and many times since—and very little has changed—except, of course, the numbers on the little off-white cards that tell you how many nickels you have to put in the slot to claim your food. After a few years' absence one tends to yelp at the sight of them. I always do and the strange young man with me did, too. Aside from that, there is a timeless quality about the place, especially in the small hours of the morning. The over-age, over-painted woman furtively eating catsup is there as she, or someone just like her, has been for fifty years; and the young couple, homely to you but beautiful to each other, full of sleepiness and discovery; and the working stiff in the case-hardened slideway of his life, grabbing a bite on the way from bed to work and not yet awake—no need to be—and his counterpart headed in the other direction; no need for him to be awake either. And all around: the same marble change counter with the deep worn pits in it from countless millions of coins dropped and scooped; behind it the same weary automaton; and around you the same nickel (not chrome) framing for the hundreds of little glass-fronted doors through which the food always looks so much better than it is. All in all, it's a fine place for the reorientation of time-travelers.

"Are you a time-traveler?" I asked, following my own whimsy and hoping to make him smile.

He didn't smile. "No," he said. "Yes, I—well—" flickering panic showed in his eyes—"I don't really know."

We bought our coffee straight out of the lion's mouth and carried it to a corner table. I think that when we were settled there he really looked at me for the first time.

He said, "You've been very kind."

"Well," I said, "I was glad of the break."

"Look, I'm going to tell you what happened. I guess I don't expect you to believe me. I wouldn't in your place."

"Try me," I offered. "And anyway—what difference does it make whether I believe you?"

"Belief or nonbelief has no power over objective truth.' " I could tell by his voice he was quoting somebody. The smile I had been looking for almost came and he said, "You're right. I'll tell you what happened because—well, because I want to. Have to."

I said fine and told him to shoot. He shot.

I work in Circulation Promotion [he began]. Or maybe I should say I *worked*—I guess I should. You'll have to pardon me, I'm a little confused. There's so much—

Maybe I should start over. It didn't begin in Rockefeller Center. It started, oh, I don't know how long ago, with me wondering about things. Not that I'm anything special—I'm not saying I am—but it seems nobody else wonders about the same things I do. I mean people are so close to what happens that they don't seem to know what's going on.

Wait, I don't want to confuse you, too. One of us is enough. Let me give you an example.

World War II was starting up when I was a kid and one day a bunch of us sat around, trying to figure out who would be fighting who. Us and the British and French on one side, sure—the Germans and Austrians and Italians on the other—that was clear enough. And the Japanese. But beyond that?

It's all history and hindsight now and there's no special reason to think about it, but at the time it was totally impossible for anyone to predict the lineup that actually came about. Go back in the files of newspaper editorials—*Harper's* or *Reader's Digest* or any other—and you'll see what I mean. Nobody predicted that up to the very end of the war our best and strongest friends would be at peace with our worst and deadliest enemy. I mean, if you put it on personal terms—if you and I are friends and there's somebody out to kill me and I find out that you and he are buddies—could we even so much as speak to each other again? Yet here was the Soviet Union, fighting shoulder to shoulder with us against the Nazis, while for nearly five years they were at

peace with Japan!

And about Japan: there were hundreds of thousands of Chinese who had been fighting a life-and-death war against the Japanese for ten years—ten years, man! —and along with them, Koreans. So we spent billions getting ourselves together to mount air strikes against Japan from thousands of miles away—New Guinea, the Solomons, Saipan, Tinian. Do you know how far it is from the Chinese mainland to Tokyo, across the Sea of Japan? Six hundred miles. Do you know how far it is from Pusan, Korea to Hiroshima? A hundred and thirty!

I'm sorry. I get excited like that to this day when I think of it. But damn it—why didn't we negotiate to move in and set up airstrips on the mainland and Korea? Do you think the natives would have turned us down? Or is it that we just don't like chop suey? Oh, sure—there are a lot of arguments like backing up Chiang against the Communists and I even read somewhere that it was not our policy to interfere in Southeast Asia. (Did I say something funny?) But you know Chiang and the Communists had a truce—and kept it too—to fight the common enemy.

Well—all right. All that seems a long way from what happened to me, I suppose, but it's the kind of thing I've spent my life wondering about. It's not just wars that bring out the thing I'm talking about, though God knows they make it plainer to see. Italy and Germany sharpening their newest weapons and strategies in the Spanish civil war, for example, or Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia—hell, the more sophisticated people got the less they could see what was in front of them. Any kid in a kindergarten knows a bully when he sees one and has sense enough at least to be afraid. Any sixth-grader knows how to organize a pressure group against a bad guy. Wars, you see, are really life-and-death situations, where what's possible, practical—logical—has a right to emerge. When it doesn't—you have to wonder. French peasants taxed till they bled to build the Maginot Line all through the thirties, carefully preparing against the kind of war they fought in 1914.

But let's look some place else. Gonorrhea could be absolutely stamped out in six months, syphilis maybe in a year. I picked up a pamphlet last month—he, I have to watch that “last month,” “nowadays,” things like that—anyway, the pamphlet drew a correlation between smoking cigarettes and a rising curve of lung

cancer, said scientific tests prove that something in cigarettes can cause cancer in mice. Now I bet if the government came out with an official statement about that, people would read it and get scared—and go on smoking cigarettes. You're smiling again. That's funny?

"It isn't funny," I told the dazed man. "Here—let me bring some more coffee."

"On me this time." He spilled coins on the table. "But you were smiling, all the same."

"It wasn't that kind of a smile, like for a funny," I told him. "The Surgeon General came out with a report years ago. Cigarette advertising is finally banned from TV, but how much difference does it make? Look around you."

While he was looking around him I was looking at his coins. Silver quarters. Silver dimes. Nickels: 1948, 1950, 1945. I began to feel very strange about this dude. Correction: my feel-strange went up another notch.

He said, "A lot of the people who aren't smoking are coughing, too."

We sat there together, looking around. Again he had shown me something I had always seen, never known. How many people cough.

I went for more coffee.

II

He went on.

Every four weeks I get—got? —got a makeready. A makeready is a copy of a magazine with all the proofing done and the type set, your last look before the presses roll. I have to admit it gives me—used to give me—a sense of importance to get it free (it's an expensive magazine) even before the "men high in government, industry, commerce and the professions" (as it says in the circulation promotion letters I write) had a chance to read it and move and shake, for they are the movers and shakers.

Anyway, there's this article in the new—not current; *really* new—issue called "The Silent Generation." It's all about this year's graduating class, the young men who in June would go into the world and begin to fit their hands to the reins. This is 1950 I'm talking about, you understand, in the spring. And it was

frightening. I mean, it spooked me while I read it and it spooked me more and more as I thought about it—the stupidity of it, the unbelievable blindness of people—not necessarily people as a whole, but these people in the article—“The Class of 1950”—young and bright and informed. They had their formal education behind them and you assumed it was fresh in their minds—not only what they had learned, but the other thing college is really for: learning how to learn.

And yet what do you suppose they were concerned about? What was it they talked about until three o'clock in the morning? What kind of plans were they making for themselves—and for all the rest of us (for they were going to be the ones who run things)? Democracy? Ultimate purpose? The relationship of man to his planet—or of modern man to history? Hell, no.

According to this, article, they worried about fringe benefits. Retirement income, for God's sake! Speed of promotion in specialized versus diversified industry! Did they spend their last few collegiate weeks in sharpening their new tools or in beering it up—or even in one last panty raid? Uh-uh. They spent them moving from office to office of the campus recruiters for big electronic and chemical and finance companies, working out the deal that would get them the steadiest, surest income and the biggest scam on the side and the softest place to lie down at the end of it.

The Silent Generation, the guy who wrote the article called them. He himself graduated in the late 'thirties and he had a lot to say about *his* generation. There was a lot wrong about them and they did some pretty crazy things. They argued a lot with each other and with their elders and betters and they joined things like the Young Socialist League—not so much because they were really lefties, but because those groups seemed the only ones around that gave a damn about the state the world was in. Most of all, you knew they were there. They were a noisy generation. They had that mixture of curiosity and rebellion that let you know they were alive.

The writer looked at the Class of '50 with a kind of despair—and something like terror, too. Because if they came to run things, experience wouldn't merely modify them and steady them. It would harden them like an old man's arteries. It would mean more-of-the-same until they'd be living in a completely

unreal world of their own with no real way of communicating with the rest of us. Growing and changing and trying new ways would only frighten them. They'd have the power, and what they'd use it for would be to suppress growth and change, not knowing that societies need growth and change—to live, just like trees or babies or art or science. So all he could see ahead was a solid, silent, prosperous standstill—and then some sudden and total collapse, like a tree gone to dry rot.

Well I don't know what you think of all this—or if you understand how hard it hit me. But I've tried to explain to you how all my life I've been plagued by these—well, I call them wonderments—how, when something makes no sense, it kind of hurts. When I was a toddler I couldn't sleep for wanting someone to tell me why a wet towel is darker than a dry one when water has no color. In grade school nobody could tell me why the sound of a falling bomb gets, lower and lower in pitch as it approaches the ground, when by all the laws of physics it ought to rise. And in high school I wouldn't buy the idea about a limitation on the velocity of light. (And I still don't.) About things like these I've never lost faith that somebody, some day, would come up with an answer that would satisfy me—and sure enough, from time to, time somebody does. But when I was old enough to wonder why smart people do dumb things that kind of faith could only last so long. And I began to feel that there was some other factor, or force, at work.

Do you remember *Gulliver's Travels*? When he was in Lilliput there was a war between the Lilliputians and another nation of little people—I forget what they called themselves—and Gulliver intervened and ended the war. Anyway, he researched the two countries and found they had once been one. And he tried to find out what caused so many years of bitter enmity between them after they split. He found that there had been two factions in that original kingdom—the Big Endians and the Little Endians. And do you know where that started? Far back in their history, at breakfast one morning, one of the king's courtiers opened his boiled egg at the big end and another told him that was wrong, it should be opened at the small end! The point Dean Swift was making is that from such insignificant causes grow conflicts that can last centuries and kill thousands. Well, he was near the thing that's plagued me all my life, but he was content to say it

happened that way. What blowtorches me is—*why*. *Why* are human beings capable of hating each other over such trifles? Why, when an ancient triviality is proved to be the cause of trouble, don't people just stop fighting?

But I'm off on wars again—I guess because when you're talking about stupidity, wars give you too many good examples. So tell me—why, when someone's sure to die of an incurable disease and needs something for pain—why don't they give him heroin instead of morphine? Is it because heroin's habit-forming? What difference could that possibly make? And besides, morphine is, too. I'll tell you why—it's because heroin makes you feel wonderful and morphine makes you feel numb and gray. In other words, heroin's fun (mind you, I'm talking about terminal cases, dying in agony, not normally healthy people) and morphine is not—and if it's fun, there must be something evil or wrong about it. A dying man is not supposed to be made to feel good. And laws that keep venereal disease from being recognized and treated; and laws against abortion; and all the obscenity statutes—right down at the root these are all anti-pleasure laws. Would you like the job of explaining that to a man from Mars, who hadn't been brought up with them? He couldn't follow reasoning like that any more than he could understand why we have never designed a heat engine—which is essentially what an internal combustion engine is—that can run without a cooling system—a system designed to dissipate heat!

And lots more.

So maybe you see what happened to me when I read the article about the Class of '50. The article peaked a tall pyramid inside me, brought everything to a sharp point.

"Have you a pencil?" said the young man. All this time and he hadn't yet lost the dazed look. I guess it was hard to blame him. "Pens are no good on paper napkins," he said.

I handed him my felt-tip. "Try this."

He tried it. "Hey, this is great. This is really keen." A felt-tip does fine on paper napkins. He studied it as if he had never seen such a thing before. "Really keen," he said again. Then he drew this:



“Yinyang,” I said. “Right?”

He nodded. “One of the oldest symbols on Earth. Then you know what it means.”

“Well, some anyway. All opposites—life and death, light and dark, male and female, heavy and light—anything that has an opposite.”

“That’s it,” he said. “Well, let me show you something.” Using another napkin, folded in two, as a straight edge, he laid it across the symbol.

“You see, if you were to travel in a straight line across a diameter—any diameter—you’d have to go on both black and white somewhere along the way. You can’t go all the way on just one color without bending the line or going a short way, less than the diameter.

“Now let’s say this circle is the board on which the game of human affairs is played. The straight line can be any human course—a life, a marriage, a philosophy, a business. The optimum course is a full diameter, and that’s what most people naturally strive for; a few might travel short chords or bent ones—sick ones. Most people can and do travel the diameter. For each person, life, marriage, whatever, there’s a different starting point and a different arrive point, but if they travel the one straight line that goes through the center, they will travel black country exactly as much as white, ying as much as yang.... The balance is perfect, no matter which way you go. Got it?”

“I see what you mean,” I said. “Your coffee’s cold.”

“So’s yours. Now look: suppose some force came along and shifted one of these colors away from the center point, like this —” And he drew again.



We studied his drawing. He drew well and quickly.

He said, "You see, if the shift were gradual, then from the very second it began there would be some people—some lives, philosophies—who would no longer have that perfect balance between black and white, between ying and yang. Nothing wrong with the course they traveled—they still aim for the very center and pass on through."

"And if the shift continued to where I've drawn it, you can see that some people might travel all the way on the white only."

"And *that's* what has happened to us. *That's* the answer to what seems to be human stupidity. There's nothing wrong with people! Far and away most of them want to travel that one straight line, and they do. It isn't their fault that the rules have been changed and that the only way to the old balance for anyone is to travel a course that is sick or twisted or short."

"The coffee *is* cold. Oh, God, I've been running off at the mouth. You'll want to get back to the office."

"No, I won't," I said. "The hell with it. You go on." For somewhere along the line he had filled me with a deep, strange excitement. The things that he said had plagued him all his life—or things like them—had plagued me, too. How often had I stood in a voting booth, trying to decide between Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum, the Big Endians versus the Little Endians? Why can't you tell someone, "Honesty is the best policy—" or "do as you would be done by—" and straighten his whole life out, even when it might make the difference between life and death? Why do people go on smoking cigarettes? Why is a woman's breast—which for thousands of artists has been the source of beauty and for millions of children the source of life—regarded as obscene? Why do we manipulate to increase the cost of this road or that school so we can "bring in Federal money" as if the Federal money weren't coming from our own pockets? And since most people try to be decent and honest and kind—why do they do the

stupid things they do?

What in the name of God put us into Viet Nam? What are ghettos all about? Why can't the honest sincere liberals just shut up and quietly move into the ghettos any time they can guarantee that someone from the ghetto can take their place in the old neighborhood—and keep right on doing it until there are no more ghettos? Why can't they establish a country called Suez out of territory on both sides of the canal—and populate it from Israel and all the Arab countries and all the refugees and finance it with canal tolls and put in atomic power plants to de-salt seawater and make the desert bloom, and forbid weapons and this-or-that "quarters" and hatred? In other words, why are simple solutions always impossible? Why is any solution that does not involve killing people unacceptable? What makes us undercopulate and overbreed when the perfect balance is available to everybody?

And at this weary time of a quiet morning in the Automat, I was pinioned by the slender bright shard of hope that my dazed friend had answers.

Go back to the office? Really, the hell with it. "You go ahead," I said, and he did.

III

Well, okay [he went on], I read that article about the class of '50—the Silent Generation—and I began to get mad—scared, and it grew and grew until I felt I had to do something about it. If the class of '50 ever got to run things, they'd have the money, they'd have the power. In a very real sense they'd have the guns. It would be the beginning of a long period—maybe forever—of more-of-the-sameness. There didn't seem any way to stop it.

Now I'd worked out this yinyang theory when I was a college sophomore, because it was the only theory that would fit all the facts. Given that some force had shifted the center, good people, traveling straight the way they should, had to do bad things because they could never, never achieve that balance. There was only one thing I didn't know.

What force had moved the center?

I sat in the office, dithering and ignoring my work, and tried to put myself together. *Courage, mon camarade, le diable est mort,* is

what I said to myself. That mean anything to you?

No?

Okay—when I was a kid I read a book called *The Cloister and the Hearth*, by Charles Reade. It was about a kid raised in a monastery who went into the world—an eighteenth-century kind of world, or earlier, I forget now. Anyway, one of the people he meets is a crazy Frenchman, always kicking up his heels and cheering people up and at the worst of times that's what he'd say: *Courage, buddy—the devil is dead.* It stuck with me and I used to say it when everything fell apart and there seemed nowhere to turn and nothing to grab hold of. I said it now, and you know, it was like a flash bulb going off between my ears.

Mind you, it was real things I was fretting about, not myths or fantasies or religious principles. It was overpopulation and laws against fun and the Dust Bowl (remember that? Well, look it up some time) and nowhere to put the garbage, and greed and killing and cruelty and apathy.

I took a pad of paper and drew these same diagrams and sat looking at them. I was very excited. I felt I was very near an answer.

Ying and Yang. Good and evil—sure—but nobody who understands it would ever assign good to one color and bad to the other. The whole point is, they both have to be there and in perfect balance. Light and dark, male and female, closed and open, life and death, that-which-is-outgoing and that-which-comes-together—all of it, everything—opposition, balance.

Well now, for a long time the devil had a bad name. Say a bad press. And why not? Just for the sake of argument, say it is the yang country he used to rule and that is the one that was forced aside. Anyone living and thinking in a straight line could spend his whole life and career and all his thinking in ying country. He'd have to know that yang was there, but he'd never encounter it, never experience it. More than likely he'd be afraid of it because that's what ignorance does to people, even good people.

And the ones who did have some experience of yang, the devil's country, would find much more of the other as they went along, because the balance would be gone. And the more the shift went on, the more innocent, well-meaning, thoughtful people ran the course of their lives and thoughts, the worse they would think of the devil's country and the worse they would talk about it and

him. It would get so you couldn't trust the books; they'd all been written from the one point of view, the majority side of imbalance. It would begin to look as if the yang part of the universe were a blot which had to be stamped out to make a nice clean alloying universe—and you have your John Knox types and your Cotton Mathers: just good people traveling straight and strong and acting from evidence that was all wrong by reason that couldn't be rational.

And I thought, *That's it!*

The devil is dead!

I have to do something about it. But what?

Tell somebody, that's what. Tell everybody, but let's be practical. There must be somebody, somewhere, who knows what to do about it—or at least how to explain about the yinyang and how it's gone wrong, so that everybody could rethink what we've done, what we've been.

Then I remembered the *Saturday Review*. The *Saturday Review* has a personal column in it that's read by all sorts of people—judging by the messages. But I mean *all* kinds of people. If I could write the right ad, word it just the right way.

I felt like a damn fool. Year of Our Lord 1950, turning all my skills as a professional copywriter to telling the world that the devil was dead, but it was an obsession, you see, and I had to do something, even something insane. I had to start somewhere.

So I wrote the ad.

*The trouble is the light-bearer's torch is out and we're all on
the same end of the seesaw. Help or we'll die of it. Whoever
knows the answer call DU6-1212 Extension 2103.*

I'm not going to tell you how many drafts I wrote or all the reasons why, copywise, that was best, mixed metaphors and all. I knew that whoever could help would know what I was asking.

Now comes the hard part. For you, I mean, not me. Me, I did what I had to. You're going to have to believe it.

Well, maybe you don't have to. Just—well, just suspend disbelief until you hear me out, okay?

All right. I wrote up the copy and addressed an envelope. I put on a stamp and a special delivery. I put in the copy and a check. I sealed it and crossed the hall—you know where the mail chute is—right across from my door. Your door. It was late by then, everyone had gone home and my footsteps echoed and I could

hear that funny whistle under the elevator doors. I slid the envelope into the slot and let go, and my phone rang.

I'd never heard it ring quite like that before. I can say that, yet I can't tell you how it was different.

I sprinted into the office and sat down and picked up the phone. I'm glad I sat down first.

There was this Voice....

I have a hell of an ear, you know that? I've thought a lot about that Voice and recalled it to myself and I can tell you what it was made of—a tone, its octave and the fifth harmonic. I mean if you can imagine a voice made of three notes, two an octave apart and the third reinforcing, but not really three notes at all, because they sounded absolutely together like one. Then, they weren't pure notes, but voice-tones, with all the overtones that means. And none of that tells you anything either, any more than if I described the physical characteristics of a vibrating string and the sound it produced—when the string happened to be on a cello played by Pablo Casals. You know how it is in a room full of people when you suddenly become aware of a single voice that commands attention because of what it is, not what it says. When a voice like that has, in addition, something to say—well, you listen.

I listened. The first thing I heard—I didn't even have a chance to say hello—was: "You're right. You're absolutely right."

I said, "Who is this?" and the Voice sighed a little and waited.

Then it said, "Let's not go into that. It would be best if you figured it out by yourself."

As things turned out, that was a hundred percent on target. I think if the Voice hadn't taken that tack I'd have hung up, or anyway wasted a lot of time in being convinced.

The Voice said. "What matters is your ad in the *Saturday Review*."

"I just mailed it!"

"I just read it," the Voice said, then explained: "Time isn't quite the same here." At least I think that's what it said. It said, "How far are you willing to go to make everything right again?"

I didn't know what to say. I remember holding the phone away from my face and looking at it as if it could tell me something. Then I listened again. The Voice told me everything I was going through, carefully, not bored exactly but the way you explain to a

child that you know what's bothering him.

The Voice said, "You know who I am but you won't think the words. You don't want to believe any part of this but you have to and you know you will. You're so pleased with yourself for being right that you cannot think straight—which is only one of the reasons you can't think straight. Now pull yourself together and answer my question."

I couldn't remember the question, so I had to be asked once more—how far was I willing to go to make everything right again?

You have to understand that this Voice meant what it said. If you'd heard it, you'd have believed it—anybody would. I know I was being asked to make a commitment and that was pretty scary, but over and above that I knew I was being told that everything could be made right again—that the crazy tilt that had been plaguing mankind for hundreds, maybe thousands of years could be fixed. And I might be the guy to do it—me, for God's sake.

If I had any doubts, any this-can't-be kind of feelings—they disappeared. How far would I go?

I said, "All the way."

The Voice said, "Good. If this works you can take the credit. If it doesn't you take the blame—and you'll have to live with the idea that you might have done it and you failed. I won't be able to help you with that."

I said, anyway I'd know I'd tried.

The Voice said, "Even if you succeed you may not like what has to be done."

I said, "Suppose I don't do it—what will happen?"

The Voice said, "You ever read 1984?"

I said I had.

The Voice said, "Like that, only more so and sooner. There isn't any other way it can go now."

That's what I'd been thinking—that's what had upset me when I read the article.

"I'll do it," is all I said.

The voice said that was fine.

It said, "I'm going to send you to see somebody. You have to persuade him. He won't talk to me and he's the only one who can do anything."

I began to have cold feet. “But who is he? Where? What do I say?”

“You know what to say. Or I wouldn’t be talking to you.”

I asked, “What do I have to do?”

And all I was told was to take the elevator. Then the line went dead.

So I turned out the lights and went to the door—and then I remembered and went back for my drawings of the yinyang, one as it ought to be and the other showing it out of balance. I held them like you’d hold an airline ticket on a first flight. I went to the elevators.

How am I going to make you believe this?

Well, you’re right—it doesn’t matter if you do or not. Okay, here’s what happened.

I pushed the call button and the door opened instantly, the way it does once in a while. I stepped into the elevator and turned around—and there I was.

The door hadn’t closed, the car hadn’t moved. It all happened when I was turning around. The door was open, but not in the hallway on the twenty-first floor. The scene was gray. Hard gray outdoor ground and gray mist. I stood a while looking out and my heart was thumping like someone was pounding me on the back with fists. But nothing happened, so I stepped out.

I was scared.

Nothing happened. The gray fog was neither still nor blowing. Sometimes there seemed to be shapes out there somewhere—trees, rocks, buildings—but then there was nothing and maybe it was all a vast plain. It had an outdoors feel to it—that’s all I can say for sure.

The elevator door was solidly behind me, which was reassuring. I took one step away from it—a little one, I’ll have you know—and called out. It took three tries before my voice would work.

“Lucifer!”

A voice answered me. Somehow it wasn’t as—well, as grand as the one I’d heard over the phone, but in other ways it was bigger.

It said, “Who is that? What do you want?”

It was cranky. It was the voice of someone interrupted, someone who felt damn capable of handling the interruption, too. And this time there really was something looming closer through

the fog.

I clapped my hands over my face. I felt my knees hit the gray dirt. I didn't kneel down you understand. The knees just buckled as if they didn't belong to me any more. But hell, the wings. Bat's wings, leathery and a tail with a point on it like a big arrowhead. That face, eyes. And thirty feet tall, man!

He touched my shoulder and I would have screamed like a schoolgirl if I'd had the breath for it.

"Come on now." It was a different voice altogether—he'd changed it—but it was his all the same. He said, "I don't look like that. That came out of your head. Here—look at me."

I looked. I guess it was funny, me kind of peeping up quickly so in case it was more than I could take I could hide my face again—as if that would do any good. But I'd had more than I could handle.

What I saw was a middle-aged guy in a buff corduroy jacket and brown slacks. He had graying hair and a smooth suntanned forehead and the brightest blue eyes I have ever seen. He helped me to my feet.

He said, "I don't look like this either, but—" he shrugged and smiled.

I said, "Well, thanks anyway—" and felt stupid. I looked around at the fog. "Where is this?"

He kind of waved his hand. "I can't really say. Where would you want it to be?"

How do you answer a question like that? I couldn't.

He could. He put the back of his hand against my cheek and gently turned my face toward him and bent close. He did something I can only describe as what you do when you pick up a magazine and run your thumb across the edge of the pages and flip it open somewhere. Only he did it inside my head somehow. Anyway there was a blaze of golden light that made me blink.

When I got my eyes adjusted to it the gray was gone. When I was a kid I worked one year on a farm in Vermont. I used to go for the cows in the late afternoon. The day pasture was huge, with a stand of pine at the upper end and the whole thing was steep as a roof, with granite outcroppings all over, gray, and white limestone. That's where we were, the very smell of it, the little lake with the dirt road around the end of it far down at the bottom and the wind hissing through the pine trees up there and

a woodchuck ducking out of sight on the skyline. I could even see three of the Holsteins, standing level on the sidehill in that miraculous way they have as if they had two short legs and two long ones. I never did figure out how they do it.

And I got a flash of panic, too, because my elevator door was gone—but he seemed to know and just waved his hand casually over to my left. And there it was, a Rockefeller Center elevator door in the middle of a Vermont pasture. Funny. When I was fourteen that door in the pasture would have scared the hell out of me. Now I was scared without it. I looked around me and smelled the late August early evening and marveled.

“It’s so real,” is what I said.

“Seems real.”

“But I was here—right here—when I was a kid.”

“Seemed real then, too, didn’t it?”

I think he was trying to make me rethink all along the line—not so much to doubt things, but to wipe everything clean and start over.

“Belief or nonbelief has no power over objective truth,” is what he told me. He said that if two people believe the same thing from the same evidence, it means that they believe the same thing, nothing more.

While I was chewing on that he took the sketches out of my hand—the same ones I just did for you. I had quite forgotten I was holding them. He looked at them and grunted. “It’s like that, is it?”

I took back the sketches and began to make my speech.

I said, “You see, it’s like this. Here the balance is—” and he kind of laughed a little and said wait, wait, we don’t have to go through all that.

I think he meant, words. I mean he touched the side of my face again and made me face him and did that thing with his eyes inside my head. Only this time it was like taking both your thumbs and pulling open the pages of a book that are sort of stuck together. I wouldn’t say it hurt but I wouldn’t want much more of it either. I remember a single flash of shame that things I’d read, studied, things I’d thought out, I’d been careless with or had forgotten. And all the while—a very short while—he was digging in my head he was curing the shame, too. I began to understand that what he could get from me wasn’t just what I’d

learned and understood—it was everything, *everything* that had ever passed through my pipeline. And all in a moment.

Then he stepped back and said, “Bastard!”

I thought, what have I done?

He laughed at me. “Not you. *Him*.”

I thought, oh. The Voice on the phone. The one who sent me.

He looked at me with those sixty-thousand candle power eyes and laughed again and wagged his head.

“I swore I’d have nothing to do with him any more,” he said, “and now look—he’s thrown me a hook.”

I guess I looked mixed-up, because I was. He began to talk to me kindly, trying to make me feel better.

He said, “It’s not easy to explain. You’ve learned so much that just ain’t so and you’ve learned it from people who also didn’t understand. Couldn’t. It goes back a long time. I mean, for you it does. For me—well, time is different here.”

He thought a bit and said, “Calling me Lucifer was real bright of you, you know that? Lucifer means ‘bringer of light.’ If you’re going to stick with the yinyang symbol—and it’s a good one—you’ll see that there’s a center for the dark part and a center for the light—sometimes they’re drawn in, a little dot on each part right where a pollywog’s eye would be. I am that dot and the Voice you heard is the other one. Lucifer I may be, but I’m not the devil. I’m just the other. It takes two of us to make the whole. What I just might have overlooked is that it takes two of us to keep the whole. Really, I had no idea—” and he leaned forward and got another quick look inside my head “—no idea at all that things would get into such a mess so quickly. Maybe I shouldn’t have left.”

I had to ask him. “Why did you?”

He said, “I got mad. I had a crazy notion one day and wanted to try something and he didn’t want me to do it. But I did it anyway and then when it got me into trouble he wouldn’t pull me out of it. I had to play it all the way through. It hurt.” He laughed a funny laugh. I understood that “it hurt” was a gigantic understatement. “So I got mad and cut out and came here. He’s been yelling and sending messages and all, ever since, but I paid him no mind until you.”

“Why me?”

“Yes,” he said, “why you?” He thought it over. “Tell me

something—have you got anything to keep you where you are? I mean a wife or a career or kids or something that would get hurt if you suddenly disappeared?”

“Nothing like that, no. Some friends—but no wife, no folks. And my job’s just a job.”

“Thought so,” he said. Talking to himself, he said, “Bastard. Built this one from the ground up, he did. Knew damn well I’d get a jolt when I saw what a rotten mess this was.” Then he said very warmly, “Don’t take that personally. You can’t help it.”

I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t help taking it a little personally either.

Maybe I was a little sharp when I said, “Well—are you going to come back or not?”

He gave it right back to me.

“I really don’t know,” he said. “Why don’t I leave it to you? You decide.”

“Me?”

“Why not? You got yourself into this.”

“Did I?”

“No matter how carefully he set you up for it, friend, he had to get your permission first. Right?”

I remembered that Voice. *How far are you willing to go?*

The one I had called Lucifer fixed me with the blazing eyes. “I am going to lay it right on you. I will do what you say. If you tell me to stay here, to stay out of it, it’s going to be like Orwell said: ‘To visualize the future you must visualize a boot stamping eternally on a human face.’ But if I come back it’s going to be almost as bad. Things are really out of hand, so much that it can’t be straightened out overnight. It would take years. People aren’t made to take the truth on sight and act on it. They have to be prodded and pushed—usually by being made so miserable in so many ways that they get mad. When enough of them get mad enough they’ll find the way.”

“Well, good then.”

He mimicked me. I think he was a little sore and just maybe he didn’t want to go back to work.

“‘Well, good, then,’ ” he mocked me. “We’ll have to shovel stupidity on them. We’ll have to get them into long meaningless wars. We’ll make them live under laws that absolutely make no sense and keep passing more of them. We’ll lay taxes on them

until they can't have luxuries and comforts without getting into trouble and we'll lay on more until it hurts to buy enough just to live."

I said, "That's the same thing as the boot!"

He said, "No it isn't. Let the class of '50 take over and you'll have that. Orwell said *eternally* and he was right. No conflict, no dissent, no division, no balance. If I come back, there'll be plenty of all that. People will die—lots of them. And hurt—plenty."

"There's no other way?"

"Look," he said, "you can't give people what they want. They have to earn it or take it. When they start doing that there'll be bombings and riots and people—especially young people—will do what they want to and what works for them, not what they're told. They'll find their own ways—and it won't be anything like what grandpa said."

I thought about all that and then about the class of '50 and the stamping boot.

"Come back," I said.

He sighed and said, "Oh, God."

I don't know what he meant. But I think he was glad.

Suddenly—well, it seemed sudden—there was more light outside the Automat than inside. I felt as dazed as my friend looked.

I said, "And what have you been doing since nineteen fifty?"

He said, "Don't you understand? All this happened last night! Last night was 1950! I got back into the elevator and walked into my—your—the office and there you were!"

"And the dev—Lucif—whoever it was, he's back, too?"

"Time is different for him. He came back right away. You've already told me enough about what's been happening since then. He's back. He's been back. Things are moving toward the center again. It's hard to do, but it's happening."

I stuck my spoon into my cold old coffee and swirled it around and thought of the purposeless crime and the useless deaths and the really decent people who didn't know they were greedy, and a deep joy began to kindle inside me.

"Then maybe it's not all useless."

"Oh, God, it better not be," he whispered. "Because all of it is my fault."

"No it isn't. Things are going to be all right." As I said that I

was sure of it. I looked at him, so lost and dazed and I thought, *I am going to help this guy. I am going to help him help me to understand better, to work out how we can bring it all into balance again.* I wondered if he knew he was a messiah, that he had saved the world. I don't think he did.

Sudden thought: "Hey," I said, "did he tell you why he dropped out mad like that? What was it—he did something the other one didn't want him to do?"

"Didn't I mention that? Sorry," said the dazed man. "He got tired of being a—a force. Whatever you call it, Spirit. He wanted to be a man for a while, to see what it was like. He could do it—but he couldn't get out of it again without the other's help. So he walked around for a while as a man."

"And?"

"And got crucified."

Pruzy's Pot

Dear Fred:

To come right to the point, do you think you could find us a house in your part of the world?

I know this comes as a surprise to you. Well, hell, this letter is probably a surprise, knowing me and how I don't write letters. Really sorry about that. Ever since I married Niwa two years ago we've been so busy there just hasn't been time, and besides, I hardly ever wrote anyway, even before. But I know you've heard something about what we've been doing, if you've read anything I've published recently. In case you haven't, I'll give it to you briefly: we're trying to work out a survival life-style in this crazy, crowded, complicated world we live in. Nothing theoretical; Niwa and I are both deadly sick and tired of sitting around with bright-eyed malcontents, all knowledge and no experience, complaining about pollution and corruption in the body, mind, and soul of man. It hit us all of a sudden, one night after one of these mouth-marathons, that anyone who has a complaint ought to have to qualify and be certified first. I mean, here's somebody who thinks it's just awful about the dirty water and the foul air. What is he doing about the solid waste he creates in his own house? What kind of poison-factory is he driving, and does he keep it running in such a way as to minimize the junk it puts into the air? Does he support government people he knows are corrupt, or by apathy just let them go on corrupting? The more we heard this kind of crap from these hobby grippers, the more we felt that a man should qualify to complain, just as he has to qualify to drive a bus or cut an appendix or run a ferryboat. Or vote. And if we were going to be honest about it, we had to look at ourselves. Point a finger at anybody and you'll find you have three fingers pointing at you.

Sorry, Fred—I didn't mean to preach, but you've got to have this background. Once we faced these things we decided to get out of the plastic cave we were living in, with the chrome kitchen and all the little bells and buzzers that told us when to take the

defrosted food out of the automatic oven and when the heavy phosphates were flushed out of the polyester double-knits, and headed for the hills to plant some honesty and see if we could harvest some survival. And you'll never guess where we found what we were looking for: in the "Houses to Rent" in the Sunday paper, the first one we checked out. And yet it wasn't all that simple, because when we got there to look at the place (2 bdr, frplc, sec, Ch & pets OK) there were cars all over the mountainside and the agent was running guided tours through the house every seven minutes. Secluded two-bedroom houses with fireplaces are not all that common so close to downtown. It was everything it claimed to be and the rent was most reasonable. It was also funky and creaky, with some interior wallboard smashed and cracked, a few broken windows, the most jarring paint-job inside I have ever seen (did you know there are seventeen DayGlo colors? It had them all), and no more than about eight pounds water pressure. However, it did have more than a half-acre of ground, and, being on a knoll with the wild part of a park just across a narrow road, it was absolutely private.

Niwa, being Niwa, full of enthusiasm and articulateness, spouted and jetted all our ideas about survival techniques in the late twentieth century, man versus plastic and the organ versus technology, and the whole rap, interspersed with enthusiastic "What a great corner for the rabbit hutch" and "Here we dry sassafras" kind of things. You haven't met her yet so I have to tell you that she lights up the landscape even when she isn't enthusiastic. When she is—wear your welding hood. The agent, a faceless type with a clipboard, took notes and said don't call us, we'll call you, and we left to look up more houses.

But that night we got a call from the landlord. He talked to Niwa and he talked to me. He had a deep voice that sounded something like that monotone you get from someone who's had a laryngectomy and uses stomach wind—a sort of controlled burp—but not exactly that either. He said very little about himself except that he was in some kind of biochemical research and he owned a couple dozen properties around. We didn't care about that part of it just then; what mattered was he said we could have the house if we wanted it, and we wanted it. He sent over a lease by messenger and we paid two months and that was that. The lease was standard except it said we were to let him put in

another half-bath. It spelled out that we could do anything we wanted with the house and grounds except mess with the plumbing. I never heard of a landlord like that and I never saw one either, not even this one, because he died a few months later.

I wish I could remember that conversation in detail or had taped it or something. It would have explained everything. Or almost. Maybe I didn't listen too carefully because mostly it was Niwa in that electric explosive way of hers expounding our theories of survival, how to use tansy (which when growing repels ants) and toads for insecticides instead of chemical sprays, and how kitchen garbage is turned into rich black dirt, and how barter (two loaves of sourdough for a brake job on the VW) is better than money, and how much better it is to live without clothes but when you do wear clothes, design them yourself and have something money couldn't buy. The thing was, this landlord, who said his name was Jones although we found out later it wasn't, he liked everything she said and that's why we got the house.

So we really put roots down—in several senses—and dug in. It was kind of great, Fred. Anybody who tells you that working out this kind of lifestyle is easy, or that there's an easy way to do it, is out of his gourd. The same thing is true of anyone who implies it's cheap. And you make mistakes. When we imported a thousand lady-bugs to help the toads fight insects in the garden, what we got was a lot of fat toads. We also discovered the mysterious communication network that exists in the netherworlds. Like, nothing is more specialized than a hornworm, a beautiful animal that grows very large and is so perfectly adapted to tomato plants that you can stand with your nose seven inches away from one (and it seven inches long) and not see it, while it is stripping the plant of leaf, bud, flower, and fruit. Now: who sent for the son of a bitch? Likewise gophers. Nothing had grown on that little quarter-acre for years but Dichondra. All of a sudden gophers are all over, tearing up the beets and carrots and going down the lines of butter lettuce like a wire contacting phone poles. Who sent for them? Then of course there was Sonya—she's a more-or-less dog we have who in a flash could pursue a gopher clear across the garden ... diagonally ... eighteen inches deep all the way. Which meant fencing.

All the same there's the way Brussels sprouts grow, which has

to be seen to be believed, and baby ears of corn eaten raw, and vine-ripened tomatoes, like nothing else you ever flang a fang into, and chard, and carrots tenderer than a tit-man's dream of the ultimate nipple ... and then the barter that went on, and a kind of understanding of where it's all really at that comes to you only if you can get naked and work soil with the sun on your back and the wind blowing through you rather than on you, and you plant a seed and lo it comes up, and it forms and buds and flowers and makes, and what it makes you eat—you eat it into your same body that did all this, no cellophane, no supermarket, no middleman, no tax. No, it isn't easy; no, it isn't cheap. It is, however, in these declining years of the twentieth century, one of the few realities that is not a bummer.

But there I go. What I am writing to you about is can you find me a place, and especially now after all that I have to tell you why. It's the toilet, the new toilet.

I think I already said it was in the lease. That was pretty weird by itself; there are plenty of things that house needs, and there's nothing wrong with the facilities that are already there. But you don't complain when a landlord wants to improve your place, even when he insists on it. So sure enough, after we'd been there ten days or so, here comes a truck with the agent and two guys, one a deaf-mute five feet across and the other one the skinniest man, and, I think, the strongest man, I have ever seen. Nobody said much, and we were busy outside most of the time. They converted one of the two big walk-in closets in the big bedroom into a nice little toidey with a sink and a pot and fluorescent lights and not-bad wallpaper and wall-to-wall carpet on the floor. There was a door from the bedroom and one from the hall—that was the new one.

And there was the pot. The agent had nothing to say about it—I don't think he knew anything—except that Mr. Jones had supplied it, that this and no other was the one he and his lease had specified, that it was a brand new design, and that in the remote eventuality we didn't want to use it, we didn't have to—there was always the old one; and we had to admit that the old one was adequate.

That happened to be the day Pruzy Penntifer arrived from New Zealand. I've told you about her, haven't I? Used to be Niwa's roommate in London before we were married. Niwa made a

special friend of Pruzy because she never could figure her out. She was the English-speaking-world's number one straight, a noncussing virgin, "impermeable, impenetrable, and insurmountable," as someone once said, so guarded against men that the armor was up against women, too, in case one of them be used by some man to infiltrate. To Niwa, who has always been interested in the matter of being honestly alive, Pruzy was a fascination and a challenge. Anyway, she was on a world trip and was to stay with us for a week, and Niwa had been spitting on her hands in anticipation for a long time. Pruzy had been warned in advance about our lifestyle and that we aren't about to change it for anybody, although the last thing we'd ever do is to persuade anyone else to adopt it. "I'll live by your rules in your house," Niwa would say, "and you can live by your rules in my house. But when you expect me to live by your rules in my house, you go too damn far." So we didn't get a real look at the toilet until after it was installed, because we had to go to the airport for Pruzy while the men were finishing up; they were gone before we got back, everything cleaned up and the key under the mat.

Pruzy you wouldn't believe—tall and slender and dressed in blacks and browns. The one word for her is "contained." Her chain-mail clothes contain her, and you get the idea her skin contains her body the same neat way. She has one of those self-contained mouths that has never sucked on anything but itself and does a lot of that, and eyes coated with one-way glass. She talks funny, being Australian, but not funny like most Australians, who to the American ear put a fine Bow-bells breadth to the simplest words; her laminated gentility contains even that.

We gave her the guided tour of the house and garden, winding up in the big bedroom, which was to be hers while she stayed. The small one was my studio, and we'd sleep in the living room, which was fine with us—we mostly did anyhow. This way we could come and go without bothering her, if that's what she might want. And of course she had her own sink and pot, the latter of which made a fine ending and climax to the tour. The big closet in the northeast corner was gone, and there was a new high-up half-casement in the outside wall, a built-in medicine chest, a very nice little washstand with a hemispherical imitation-marble bowl and gold-colored fittings, and the ... the ... well, the pot.

It was wider and lower than most, bulbous. It seemed at first to have scales, tiny close-set ones, but if you closed your eyes and touched it, it was perfectly smooth. The seat was covered and there seemed to be no way to lift the cover—and indeed there was not; it took a little fumbling to discover that the raised pale spot on one side was a control. It must have (I thought at the time) some sort of electrostatic system, like those elevator buttons you don't depress but just touch, because on contact the cover slid back like an eyelid, exposing the bowl. I got only the one glimpse of a complicated contour inside, obviously moist (though I saw no standing water) and deep red. And then, only half meaning to, I hit the spot again and the cover slid silently shut, whereupon the whole thing went (with overtones of joy and controlled power) softly hroom, hroom, hroom ... like the revving of a distant muffled motorcycle or a tiger's purring.

I heard a tiger purr once.

Just as I wish I could recall that one phone conversation with the late Mr. Jones, I wish I had been watching Niwa's face and especially Pruzy's, but I was preoccupied with my own reactions. There was something profoundly unsettling about that piece of plumbing. I had a crazy artist friend once who painted the inside of his toilet with high-gloss enamels, bright red and cerise and ivory, so that when you opened it up it looked like a huge slavering mouth with a wet tongue and sharp teeth. That was unsettling, too, but it was also funny. This one wasn't funny. For one thing, the shock value of my friend's work of art lay in the fact that in all respects his was a conventional fixture, with his efforts applied to it, whereas this thing was all of a piece—eerie all over. I think Niwa expressed it best when we talked about it later, after Pruzy had gone to bed. She said, "I think if it looked as if it might bite, I could laugh it off. But it doesn't. It looks as if it was going to smile!"

We lay quietly for a long time, thinking about sitting down on that smile. Then one or the other of us—it doesn't matter which, because we both felt the same way—said, "Well, she can have the damn thing." And we left it at that.

During the night I heard it going hroom, hroom twice.

The next day we got up and went to work as usual, me in my studio and Niwa in the kitchen and garden. Pruzy slept late, getting her time zones sorted out, and when she emerged and

encountered us naked the way we always are in the house and yard, she took it imperturbably—well, she'd been told, she knew what to expect, and besides, nothing—nothing—can crack that chick's unassailable front. She, of course, stayed not only dressed, but groomed.

It must have been three days later that we began to notice how much time Pruzy was spending in her nonbath bathroom. She always shot the bolts on both doors when she went in and unlocked them when she left—a purposeless ritual, but then so is nineteen-twentieths of all ritual privacy. (An airline hostess once told me a little old lady borrowed a safety pin from her and she found it later in the tiny ten-inch curtains over the porthole in the john, where Granny had pinned them closed—at seven hundred miles per hour and thirty thousand feet—to guard against Peeping Toms.) Niwa and I had no need or desire to go in there, so she might just as well have kept the outside door permanently locked, but once she'd established the ritual she kept it up, that being the nature of ritual. So we always heard the bolts, and though we had no wish to pry, we couldn't help but notice she was spending an awful lot of time in there.

"Maybe she likes to read there. Lots of people—"

"Pruzy is not a reader," Niwa said positively. "She really thinks she knows everything she needs to know." Which figured. People like that have achieved a kind of balance, and they'll fight like hell to keep it. One of the best ways to do that is to put the brains in suspended animation.

It took about five days for us—Niwa, really—to realize she wasn't using any toilet paper. That became an increasing fascination, too, as the days went by. And they went by, too: Pruzy postponed her departure for a week and then for another, and started to chip in to the exchequer before we could suggest it ... and she was no trouble, really. But we did wonder about the toilet paper. It wasn't anything you could come out and ask, either. Not with Pruzy. She was company of a sort for Niwa when I'd go through my marathon writing sessions, or my marathon leave-me-the-hell-alone sessions, and she helped efficiently with the house ... and got to where she was spending three hours a day in her john.

She went into town one day and got her visa extended. Then there was a phone call when she was out, about a naturalization

form. "I think," Niwa whispered to me one night, "she's going to immigrate, take the vows, join the melting pot."

"No pot in the world could melt that one," I remember saying. I was wrong.

Sonya had puppies. She would do that from time to time, concealing her intentions until it happened, then suddenly not being there at chowtime. Then it was a matter of beating the bush and crawling through dark crannies until you found out where she'd spawned them. If you couldn't, the pups would give themselves away sooner or later, mewling and yapping. They were usually a sorry lot. This time was no exception. She'd found a crawl space under the house and had her puppies way underneath. I bellied under some forty feet before I found them, and it happened to be right under Pruzy's bathroom. Though puppies were my immediate preoccupation, I couldn't help noticing the plumbing. There were hot and cold pipes to the washstand and a cold feed to the toilet, shiny new pipe. And you know what else?

Nothing else. No waste pipe. I mean, no sewer, no outlet. I'm telling you, Fred, nothing. And don't tell me I could be wrong. Water pipes are half-inch, maybe three-quarters, but waste plumbing is big, man—four to seven inches.

I didn't say anything to Niwa about it, but the next day I went up on the roof. There was a vent pipe, sure enough. I hung an ear on it. Air was passing through it all right—inward. Before I could check it out it stopped, and then started again.

Outward.

Fred, it was going in and out about twenty-five to the minute. Like breathing.

I didn't say anything about that to Niwa either. Not then.

It was the next day—yesterday—when the girls were out that I decided on a confrontation with the thing. Well, to tell the truth, it was my lower gut that decided me. I was on my way to the old familiar comfortable john when I suddenly thought of that purring pot of Pruzy's. (In our minds it has become completely hers; neither of us ever use it.) So in I went.

There it sat, low, wide ... waiting. I reached down and touched the pale hump, and the cover snicked back instantly and almost silently. I looked down into that moist, convoluted red surface and worried a little. Well, I thought, okay, but one at a time, all

right?

So, man-style, I stood in front of the thing and let fly.

Fred, the best possible way to describe what happened is to say it gasped in astonishment. I don't think it objected; I just don't think it had ever met a man before. For a split second a black orifice appeared way down deep, then the sidewalls sort of bulged and rubbed together and it, well, swallowed. Well, dammit, you don't have to believe me. But now that I'm started I'm going to tell it all.

I'm not usually a stubborn guy, but I'd come in there to do something and I meant to do it. Also to find out something. So I sat down to finish what I had started.

For a moment that thing and I, both of us, I'll swear, we held our breaths. Then I had a rush of brains to the head and grabbed the family jewels and held 'em up as high as I could. I mean I wanted answers but I wasn't about to walk out of there singing soprano, and it dimly occurred to me that this thing might be designed to remove anything it hadn't programmed itself for.

Well there was this tense moment, like the one in the cowboy pictures when the walkdown is over and the shooting hasn't started yet, and then I let fly. I submit to you that I'm not characteristically one of those strain-and-ponder types who has his forty-minute ritual. I don't go till I have to and when I have to I go altogether.

I never fazed this thing. At the first show of anything, something warm and moist zocked me gently and firmly on the bull's-eye and—now dammit, I can see your face as you read this, Fred; it's true! Also, it's not funny—and it applied just as much suction as I supplied pressure. It made the whole thing so easy and so fast that even before my reflexes could pucker me up I was done. I came up off that thing as if it was hot—which it wasn't—and even in that split second I was aware of why Pruzy never had to use toilet paper. I suppose I made a deal of noise, too. Next thing I was aware of I was flat on my face in the hall. You want to escape as fast as I wanted to escape, you pull up your pants first. And behind me the damn thing's going hroom, hroom, hroom, happy as catnip.

Well, that's the story, except for Pruzy. I guess I was a little hysterical when the girls got home because I was yelling that we had to move; I mean flat out, no argument, we were getting out

of here. As soon as Pruzy got the gist of it she came alive like I have never seen before. Could she have the place? Could she take over the lease? And Niwa, flabbergasted, shouting at me what do you mean, move? Are you out of your thing, man? What about the garden?

The picture that overrides that whole wild scene is the imperturbable Pruzy, eyes glowing, voice breathy, saying over and over, “Please, you must, you know. I love this house. I love it, love it, love It....” The only way I could cut the chaos was to take Niwa out in the car then and there and tell her what had happened.

She took it hard—not the idea of moving: you can always get another house. Not even the garden, though it’s a shame after all that love and work, because you see, once you clear ground and plant something, that’s more important than harvest-time, you take so much away with you. Why Niwa cries a lot is that she feels she’s failed. She’d thought she would go to any lengths, do anything, live any way that would bring us closer to the cycle of earth and natural food, recycle, replenish ... but she had to draw the line at Pruzy’s pot, which (like all of us) lived off the products of other life-forms. If it was bred to deliver special joys, that was no different from the function of fragrant flowers or bright sweet fruit, right? But she couldn’t cut it, and that made her whole conviction about life-style look like a hypocrisy and a failure, and she cries a lot. For all that, neither of us can take the image of Niwa, too, coming out of a two-hour session with Pruzy’s pot, saying breathily, “I love it, love it....” Ecch.

So find us a house, Fred, as far away from here as you can, and if it’s one with plastic walls and monofilament rugs and a kitchen full of dials and bells—fine, man, fine.

Afterword to “Pruzy’s Pot”

Spider Robinson (first published 1986)

Although written in the 1960s, “Pruzy’s Pot” does not refer to cannabis—

Just a moment, please.

In this story, Sturgeon was attempting something genuinely fundamental—

Excuse me, I’ll be right with you.

—*story can be digested in a single sitting*—

I’ve almost got it under control, now, really—

—*obvious intent here was to discommode his r*—

Dammit—

—*whole new meaning to the phrase, let’s go bowling*—

STOP IT! I mean it, now, cut it out! This is serious business, quit fooling around: I’m trying to introduce my beloved dead teacher and friend here. How about a little solemnity?

—*solemnity? The man was a pervert, a degenerate, a true sicko—and this is the story to prove it. I should have guessed when he told me he liked scat singing*—

Aw, shove it up.... Now you got *me* doing it. I’m terribly sorry, ladies and gentleman. These interruptions are all coming from The Lower Half of My Brain. Unlike most people, I have a brain which is bisected *horizontally*, into upper and lower hemispheres. The upper half handles cognitive and verbal skills, motor activities, life-support—everything, really. That upper half, the ‘higher function’ if you will, is *me*, the one who addresses you now, and I do all the work around here. The Lower Half does nothing but make up puns and dirty jokes all day long.

—“*coprophilia?*” “*Not really; I’ve room for dessert*”—

Cut it out, I said! Excuse me, dear reader. I can usually manage to deny the Lower Half access to our vocal chords, suppressing nine out of ten puns that he produces, both from a sense of civic duty, and from an aversion to being punched. But Lower often seems to seize control of my typing fingers, and is particularly

hard to discipline whenever Ted Sturgeon comes up—

—according to *Lady Jayne*, that was all the time—

Just ignore him. It doesn't make him stop, but it builds character. As I was saying, the subject of Ted Sturgeon makes it very difficult to control my Lower Half. Ted, you see, had an overdeveloped Lower Half himself, and his and mine flirted shamelessly together.

—want to rephrase that, *Upper*?—

Ted was a paronomasiac. A compulsive punster. I have, thanks to Lower, acquired some small ill repute in that regard myself. When Ted came to Halifax to be Toastmaster for Halcon, our annual science fiction convention, he came with the attitude and aspect of the Old Punslinger who has heard that there's a fast new young punk in town, and plans to settle which is the faster. We met in front of the crosstime saloon with puns blazing (and fannish eyeballs glazing) and the punfire lasted all weekend long

—talk about selling your birthright for a pot of message—

Nonetheless he redeemed himself at the eleventh hour. When the chips were down, Ted's better self regained control; he met the test of manhood. The despairing con committee, besieged with complaints, had taken us to dinner at a curry restaurant, whose menu listed over a hundred different kinds of curry, by number. Naturally (if that is the word I want), Ted and I went down the list, punning on each name in rotation, volleying back and forth; Ted would imitate the unforgettable voice of Mr. Bacciagalupo from the Abbot and Costello show and say, "Bud's cigars stink; open the Vindaloo," so I'd do my Elvis impersonation on "Love me Tandoor," then Ted would read, "Chicken Phal ... but was not seriously injured," and so on. Cries of protest from neighboring tables, the pleas of the con-com, all went unheeded. People began leaving—

—which did not curry favor with the management—

—dammit, Lower Half, cut that out!... and things looked grim. Then we reached number 43.

It was Ted's turn, he had started this. He wrestled with his conscience, opened and closed his mouth several times ... and resigned. There was only one way to properly salute such decency. I wavered ... and let Ted's magnificent example guide me, let his courage show me the way. I too resigned, and the

contest was declared a draw.

Number 43 was “Chick peas curry.”

So in spite of the story you are about to read, I insist that Ted Sturgeon was a man of *character*, a man of decency and principle, a man with higher—

—*for Chrissake, Upper, he wrote a whole book about a guy who drinks menstrual blood; he wrote a story about a guy who saved the world while sitting on the toilet*—

—he wrote warm, gentle, insightful stories which explored the nature of human love, which resonated with hope and wisdom, he delineated the tragicomic—

—*he wrote a book full of hermaphrodites and a novel about motherfuckers and a story about a man who had a deep emotional and sexual relationship with a pair of hands dangling from an imbecile, for God’s sake—I mean, we’re talking here about a guy even more bent than Phil Farmer, even more disgusting than Jonathan Swift, with a finer grasp of the grotesque than even David Cronenberg*

—not only the most literate and lyrical writer science fiction ever had, but one of the nicest, most decent and genuinely lovable human beings that ever—

—*and the story this reader is about to sample is, let us face it, a minor story, a story so twisted that even National Lampoon must have hesitated to print it, a truly gross little gem about The Ultimate Felch—so why don’t you just shut up and*

—this story makes many subtle and trenchant satiric points about the retentive personality and the societal ramifications of the organic lifestyle and—

—*there’s no other kinds, once you’ve tasted hinds, that’s what the story has to say, Upper*—

—dammit, Lower, I loved the man as much as I loved my mother, he wrote a story that kept me from killing myself once, okay?

—*this may be the only story ever written after reading which you do not want to follow Ted’s lifelong advice and ‘Ask the next question,’ Upper*—

—this is my bloody introduction, not yours, and I’m not going to let you screw it up, and if you don’t like it, you can kiss my—

—*gotcha*—

—aw, sh—

—gotcha again! —

Dear reader, you may or may not “enjoy” (whatever that means) the story that follows. It certainly is not even in the running for the best story that Ted ever wrote. But once you have read it, I defy you to forget it. I can’t.

And believe me, a couple of times I’ve tried....

Story Notes Volume XII

Noël Sturgeon

The stories in this volume were written, for the most part, between 1970 and 1972. Before this, Sturgeon, separated from his third wife Marion and their four children in Woodstock, NY, was living in Los Angeles, initially with Harlan Ellison® (see Volume XI: *The Nail and the Oracle*) and then in a run-down motel in Sherman Oaks. He wrote few stories, but worked in television (for example the three *Star Trek* teleplays “Amok Time,” (aired 9/15/67) “Shore Leave,” (aired 12/29/66) and “The Joy Machine”), wrote introductions and book reviews, and tried without much success to become a screenwriter. He also tried to sell his own stories to movie producers, and was especially successful with his novel *More Than Human*. In fact, he spent two weeks working with Orson Welles in an attempt to produce a treatment for *More Than Human*; but this arrangement fell through. (*More Than Human* was optioned continually from this period until 2000, but a movie has never been made.)

In 1969 Sturgeon started a correspondence with a young American fan living in England, Wina Golden, who was a journalist and photographer. The correspondence blossomed into a romance, and Wina began living with Ted in Los Angeles in the spring of 1969, changing her last name to Sturgeon. They had a son, Andros, in 1970. From a much younger generation than Sturgeon, Wina’s journalistic experience with rock musicians; her do-it-yourself philosophy in terms of food, clothes, and health; as well as her determination to earn her own living, had a deep influence on Sturgeon. During this time, they began to socialize with rock musicians, such as Peter Tork of the Monkees; Mama Cass of the Mamas and Papas; Crosby, Stills and Nash; and Joni Mitchell, many of whom had read Sturgeon and were influenced by his ideas of gestalt, love, pacifism, and resistance to social conventions. Sturgeon claimed that Mama Cass was a special fan of his story “Saucer of Loneliness,” and when approached to film

it, he recommended that she play the part of the female protagonist. (It was finally made into a *Twilight Zone* episode in 1986, written by David Gerrold, with Shelley Duvall in the main role.) David Crosby hired Sturgeon to write a screenplay of his dystopian song, “Wooden Ships”; however, it never went past the point of a first few drafts. (See Crosby’s introduction to Volume VI.)

In 1971, a collection of Sturgeon stories entitled *Sturgeon is Alive and Well* (G.P. Putnam’s) was published. Given that Sturgeon had written only about two stories a year since 1960, it represented a significant comeback for him. This long period of writer’s block, though one of several in his career, was much more well-known because it occurred after he was very well established as one of the best writers in the field, and speculation was constant about why more stories did not appear—hence the title of the collection. One of the consequences of having one’s writer’s block be such a matter of public concern was that Sturgeon acquired a reputation as having written very few stories in his lifetime, though *The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon* belies this, comprising 221 stories. The fact that so many of them are very good, classics in the field, means that Sturgeon broke his own law in this regard; Sturgeon’s Law holds that 90% of *everything* is crap, an adage he crafted in response to the constant downgrading of science fiction as a literary genre.

Because of the influence of its muse, *Sturgeon is Alive and Well* is often called “the Wina Stories” by Sturgeon aficionados. In *The Complete Stories*, the stories from this anthology are split up between Volumes XI and XII, and are slightly out of chronological order. But Sturgeon meant them to be together, and put a lot of thought into the arrangement. In a 1979 letter to his agent, Kirby McCauley, he writes: “This collection is one of the very best balanced of all my titles, half sf and half mainstream and a fine showcase for what I do.” A 1954 story, “To Here and the Easel,” was the only story written outside of the 1969–1971 period, presumably included because it was a story about writer’s block (it appears in Volume VIII). “Jorry’s Gap,” “It Was Nothing, Really!,” and “Brownshoes,” all published in 1969, and “Take Care of Joey,” published in 1970, are in Volume XI. All of the other stories from *Sturgeon is Alive and Well* are in this volume.

Both Wina and Ted describe these stories as being written in an

outpouring. For example, Wina recalls going down to the office at the La Fonda Motel (in Sherman Oaks where she first lived with Ted), and encountering a man who looked at her and said: “It’s a beautiful day,” and she knew that he was actually saying it about her. She told Ted the story, and wished out loud that she was a girl who always knew what they meant. Ted immediately went to the typewriter sat down and wrote “The Girl Who Knew What They Meant” in about two hours. In another case, she recounted a former boyfriend breaking up with her by saying: “It’s not that. It’s you,” in response to which Ted wrote the story “It’s You!” According to Wina, the writing of “Slow Sculpture,” occurred shortly after a party at Gene Roddenberry’s home, where the *Star Trek* producer was given a bonsai tree. On the drive home, Wina wondered out loud if the wiring and pruning used to shape a tree could be metaphorically used to shape a human, calling bonsai a form of “slow sculpture.” (Personal correspondence, Wina Sturgeon) Many of the stories have a female character with Wina’s distinctive apricot-colored hair and eyes.

Throughout his career, Sturgeon often wrote stories in a one-off fashion, as evidenced by the manuscripts in his papers, which very rarely have any rewritten sections, multiple drafts or crossed-out words, but appear to have been produced in one sitting. A similar but longer run of stories occurred from 1951–1959, after Sturgeon moved to upstate New York with his third wife, Marion. But clearly, “the Wina Stories” were felt as a special case of this ability to produce story after story in a sudden outpouring. Sturgeon’s introduction to *Sturgeon is Alive and Well* recounts this process.

Yes, I am alive and well.

Once to a perceptive friend I was bemoaning the fact that there was a gap in my bibliography for 1940 to 1946. (Actually some stories were published during the period, but only one had been written after 1940.) What wonders I might have produced had I not been clutched up, I wailed. And he said no, be of good cheer. He then turned on the whole body of my work a kind of searchlight I’d not been able to use, and pointed out to me that the early stuff was all very well, but the stories were essentially entertainment; with few exceptions they lack that Something to Say quality which marked the later output. In other words, the retreat, the period of silence, was in no way a cessation, a

stopping. It was a silent working out of ideas, of conviction, a profound selection. The fact that the process went on unrecognized and beyond or beneath my control is quite beside the point. The work never stopped.

I've held hard to that revelation in recent years, and no longer go into transports of anguish when the typewriter stops. I do other things instead, in absolute confidence that when the silent subterranean work is done, it will surface. When it does so, it does with blinding speed—a short story, sometimes, in two hours. But to say I wrote it in two hours is to overlook that complex, steady, silent processing and reprocessing that has been going on for months and often years. Say then I typed it in two hours. I do not know how long it took to write. I could only type it when it was finished.

I do not know if the package you hold in your hands will be regarded as remarkable in the bibliography. Biographically it represents a miracle, and engenders some tributes.

I was living at the bottom of the mountain in Neverneverland, far under a rock. Looking back on that time, I now know that I was unaware of just how far I had crawled and just how immobile my crouch. Suddenly one day there exploded a great mass of red hair attached to a laughing face with a beauty spot right in the center of her forehead and a totally electric personality. Her name was Wina and she was a journalist and photographer and a dress designer and a dancer and she traveled 6,500 miles with her cat (inside of whom she smuggled four kittens) to marry me. She crawled way in under that rock and hauled me out. We acquired a squirrel and some tropical fish and a baby (whose name is Andros Theodore, which means "Man is the gift of God," Lindsay Sturgeon) and set up housekeeping.

And suddenly I wrote. As I've said, I do not know how long it took to write the stories, but I typed one a week for eleven consecutive weeks, and after a short hiatus, a twelfth—all while I was writing a novel. So the first tribute goes to Wina.

My next acknowledgment is to Tom Dardis, not simply for accepting the book for publication, but for agreeing to use this particular table of contents. For one thing I am delighted to have in one place exactly (with one exception) those "Wina" stories—but that's personal and sentimental. My most profound appreciation is extended to him for his willingness to include some of the stories which cannot be categorized "science fiction."

Science fiction is my best friend and my worst enemy. But for one

or two notable examples, science fiction and science fiction writers are relegated to the back pages of the book review section, not to be taken seriously by serious critics. "I don't read science fiction," says Mr. J. Q. Public, with *On the Beach* and *Dr. Strangelove* and *Lord of the Flies* and *Messiah* and a half hundred others on the bookshelf behind him, and he marches out to see *2001*—all science fiction but never called science fiction and virtually never written by anyone who has ever appeared in *Analog* or *Galaxy* or *New Worlds* except, perhaps, in reprint, and some of the magazines which run reprints (and I'm glad they do). The predicament of the professional science-fiction writer who takes himself and his work seriously could be called comic if it weren't for such unfunny things as hospital bills and the IRS, and why more of them aren't certifiably paranoid is a greater wonder than any of them have yet wrought. It seems a literal truth that to have acquired a reputation in science fiction is to be reflexively relegated to the 25th Century with *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers*, all wrapped up in a colored funny paper.

Yet the best writers in the field (as one of the cognoscenti once pointed out) write science FICTION, not SCIENCE fiction. Let me tell you something: you cannot write good fiction about ideas. You can only write good fiction about people. Good science fiction writers are good fiction writers. When a blatant dabbler like Kingsley Amis gets three columns in *Time* magazine while nobody ever heard of a polished and thoughtful writer like Edgar Pangborn, it breaks my heart.

Very special thanks must go to two bright young editors, Merrill Miller and Jared Rutter, who bought most of the stories in this book. They asked me for stories. They didn't ask for science fiction or fantasy stories; they did not demand the currently obligatory skin scene—they just bought my stories as they arrived; and one can approach the typewriter with a wonderful sense of wingspread with a market like that.

Nothing will ever stop me from writing science fiction, but there sure is a plot afoot to keep me from writing anything else, and I won't have it. Perhaps now you can understand why I'm so pleased with this collection.

My final tribute has to do with the one story in this book which is not the product of that astonishing summer. I wrote "To Here and the Easel" for a Ballantine book now long out of print. It was called *Star Short Novels*, and when Ballantine issued one of the three novels in a

separate volume I knew it would not be reprinted, and asked, and was graciously granted permission to use a story in another book. It was published in 1954 and has been seen nowhere else since. —TS

“The [Widget], the [Wadget], and Boff”; first published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, November and December, 1955. Teaser, most likely written by the editor, Bob Mills: “CRITICS FREQUENTLY COMPLAIN, WITH NOT A LITTLE JUSTICE, THAT THE GREATEST LACK IN SCIENCE FICTION IS CHARACTERIZATION, THE FULL-BODIED DEVELOPMENT OF LIVING PEOPLE. NO WRITER HAS DONE MORE TO ANSWER THAT CHARGE THAN THEODORE STURGEON; AND THIS NEW AND CURIOUSLY TITLED SHORT NOVEL IS, TO MY TASTE, ONE OF THE FINEST PIECES OF WORK THAT EVEN STURGEON HAS YET ACCOMPLISHED, COMPARABLE ONLY TO HIS *MORE THAN HUMAN* IN THE RICHNESS AND DEPTH OF ITS CHARACTER-CREATION. YOU’RE ABOUT TO MEET A FASCINATING AND REAL GROUP OF PEOPLE; AND IN THEIR COMPANY YOU’LL LIVE THROUGH AN ABSORBING STORY, LEARN A NEW ASPECT OF ALIEN OBSERVATION ... AND EVEN COME TO KNOW THE NATURE OF THOSE DEVICES WHICH OUR LANGUAGE CAN ONLY APPROXIMATELY RENDER AS [WIDGET] AND [WADGET].”

In terms of chronological order, this story should have appeared in Volume X of *The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon*, but was too long for that volume. The character Robin in this story is named after Sturgeon’s first son, who was in turn named after the character in Sturgeon’s story, “Maturity,” Robin English. At the date of publication of this story, Robin Sturgeon, like the character, was three. This story contains one of the earliest, most complex and least didactic examples of Sturgeon’s methodological credo, which he later labeled: “Ask the next question,” symbolized by a Q with an arrow through it. (In his later years, Sturgeon wore this symbol as a necklace and usually included a sketch of the symbol with his signature. The symbol is now used on the annual Sturgeon Memorial Short Story Award trophy.) More than the standard notion of “critical thinking,” “ask the next question” was meant to interrogate the very frameworks in which commonplace inquiry take place, and to explode conventional wisdoms and prejudices as a result. The

ability to do that is presented here as a “synapse” necessary to the survival of the human species itself. The method is also depicted as therapeutic, and the flash of revelation that instantaneously reorders a personality is based on experiences Sturgeon himself had in various therapies. As in the case of the protagonist Gerry in *More Than Human*, and many other Sturgeon characters, such a life-changing therapeutic experience is at the heart of many of Sturgeon’s narratives. The critical examination of the character Halvorsen’s guilt over being different sexually is one example among many of Sturgeon’s interest in critiquing sexual repression and conventionality. On a minor note, the sandwich that Mary Haunt makes in this story was one of Sturgeon’s favorites.

“The Beholders”; 1964. Previously unpublished. This story was written while Sturgeon lived in Woodstock, New York, and should have appeared in Volume XI. Sturgeon was familiar with LSD, as he went through psychedelic therapy in 1964 and 1965 with the therapist Jim Hayes, which produced the autobiographical essay, *Argyll* (published in 1993).

“It’s You!”; First published in *Adam*, January 1970. Reprinted in *Sturgeon is Alive and Well*. Though, as mentioned above, Wina Sturgeon recalls this story being prompted by a remark she made about a boyfriend ending a relationship with her, ironically, the story recounts a process quite close to that which Sturgeon went through with Wina, as she made new clothes for him, encouraged him to wear jewelry, and brought him into a social context very different than others he had encountered.

“Slow Sculpture”; first published in *Galaxy*, February 1970. Reprinted in *Sturgeon is Alive and Well*. Winner of the Hugo and Nebula Awards for Best Short Story.

“The Girl Who Knew What They Meant”; first published in *Knight*, February 1970. Reprinted in *Sturgeon is Alive and Well*. Again, Wina Sturgeon recalls the idea for this story coming from a chance encounter she described to Sturgeon.

“The Patterns of Dorne”; first published in *Knight*, May 1970,.

Reprinted in *Sturgeon is Alive and Well*.

“**Crate**”; first published in *Knight*, October 1970. Reprinted in *Sturgeon is Alive and Well*.

“**Suicide**”; first published in *Adam*, June 1970. Reprinted in *Sturgeon is Alive and Well*.

“**Uncle Fremmis**”; first published in *Adam*, 1970. Reprinted in *Sturgeon is Alive and Well*.

“**Necessary and Sufficient**”; first published in *Galaxy*, April 1971. Teaser: “IT WAS MOST EFFECTIVE BIRTH CONTROL ... BUT COULD ANYONE BORN SURVIVE IT?” The series of notes written by the unseen girlfriend in different modalities (comic, furious, distraught, etc.) recalls one of Sturgeon’s favorite books, *Exercises in Style* by Raymond Queneau, in which the same story is retold in 99 different styles. Sturgeon used the book in almost all of his writing classes.

“**The Verity File**”; first published in *Galaxy*, May 1971. Teaser: “YESTERDAY’S TRUTHS ARE DYING—AND TODAY’S FEEL NONE TOO GOOD!” Sturgeon previously used this narrative technique (a story told in interoffice memos, letters, and reports) in his novel *Some of Your Blood* (1961).

“**Occam’s Scalpel**”; first published in *If*, August 1971. Reprinted in the collection *The Stars are the Styx* (Dell 1979), which contained author introductions to each story. Sturgeon’s intro to this one:

Who was the richest man in the world in 1971, while I was writing this? And what came creeping into my typewriter to suggest that any particular rich man would die under inexplicably mysterious circumstances?

I am unabashedly proud of some of the things I have done and can do with a typewriter. I’ve gone through a lot of grinding and polishing and tumbling to learn how to do it.

But there is something else that happens once in a while, something

I'm unaware of at the time, which doesn't manifest itself to me until after I've written a passage and reread it. I see then some hundreds or thousands of words written outside any learned idiom, written, as it were, in a different "voice," and containing, sometimes, factual material which I did not and could not have known at the time, and (rather more often) emotional reactions and attitudes which I know I have not experienced. This phenomenon is quite beyond my control; that is, I know of no way to command or evoke it. I just have to wait for it to happen, which it seldom does. When it does, it keeps me humble; when I'm complimented on it, I feel guilty.

Howard Hughes, the reclusive billionaire, died in April 1976 of malnutrition. Sturgeon seems to be implying by this introduction that at the time he wrote "Occam's Scalpel," it was not known that Hughes would die of starvation like the rich man in the story.

The "piney-birchy woods with plenty of mountain laurel" and the "fire station on the Village Green" recall Woodstock, NY, where Sturgeon lived from 1960–1966; the description of the brother of the protagonist as being one of the "night people" is a reference to Jean Shepherd, the 1950s-'60s NYC radio show host who was a friend of Sturgeon's and who called his fans "the night people." (As a lark, Shepherd and Sturgeon decided to promote a non-existent book titled *I, Libertine* written by a nonexistent Frederick R. Ewing. "The night people" became so interested in buying the book that Sturgeon actually wrote it [as what can be described as a romantic historical legal thriller, unlike anything else Sturgeon produced] under the Ewing pseudonym. It was published in 1956 by Ian and Betty Ballantine, who were in on the hoax.)

"**Dazed**"; first published in *Galaxy*, September, 1971. Reprinted in *The Stars Are the Styx* (Dell 1979). Teaser: "TO FIND BLACK, SEARCH WHITE. TO FIND HEAVEN, SEARCH HELL...." Sturgeon's intro to the story in *The Stars Are the Styx*:

What a strange little story this is! As people keep asking me: "Where do you get your crazy ideas?"

Harlan Ellison claims he gets his from a little old lady in Schenectady, who sends them in a plain brown wrapper. I don't know her. I think that what I do is to make some sort of sense out of the world and its population, an activity that repeatedly drives me into

fantasy as the only area in which logic seems to have any consistency.

Of one thing I can assure you: virtually no character in my bibliography stands out as clearly in my mind as this dazed man. I don't think he shows up in a particularly sharp focus to the reader, but he does to me—every gesture, every intonation. And unlike most of my characters, he isn't modeled on anyone I know. He's uniquely himself, this dazed man.

Strange. Very strange.

Sturgeon worked for *Fortune* magazine as a copywriter from 1948 to 1952. As a young writer in the forties scraping by on almost no money, he spent a great deal of time in the Automat. He also spent summers on a farm in Vermont when he was a young boy, as described in *Argyll*, his autobiographical essay.

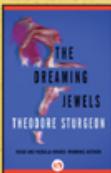
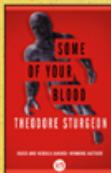
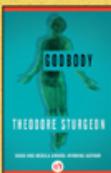
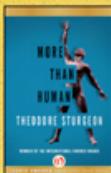
“Pruzy’s Pot”; first published in *National Lampoon*, June, 1972. The house and lifestyle described here reflect the way Ted and Wina lived in Echo Park, Los Angeles, during the early 1970s, as “Niwa’s” name echoes Wina’s. In a small house near the park, they had an extensive garden, a rabbit hutch in which they raised rabbits for food, a pet boa constrictor and a pet squirrel. Their organic, do-it-yourself lifestyle was guided by the research done by Wina in her job as the consumer affairs correspondent for KPFK radio. There was in fact a real dog named Sonya (who was in actuality a good-for-nothing dog), though she was owned not by Ted but by his daughter, Tandy. The Echo Park house did not, however, have an alien toilet. “Pruzy’s Pot” was reprinted in a limited edition volume (some packaged with an audio tape of Sturgeon reading the story) by Hypatia Press in 1986, with a foreword by Spider Robinson and an afterword by Jayne Sturgeon. Spider Robinson’s foreword, with his kind permission, is reprinted in this volume.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Theodore Sturgeon was born on February 26, 1918, and died in Eugene, Oregon, on May 8, 1985. A resident of New York City, Woodstock, New York, Los Angeles, and Springfield, Oregon, he was the author of more than thirty novels and short story collections. He won the International Fantasy Award for his novel *More Than Human*; the Hugo Award and Nebula Award for his short story “Slow Sculpture,” the Outstanding Achievement Award from the International Society of Science Fiction, Horror, and Fantasy for the *Star Trek* screenplay, *Amok Time*; and the Gaylactica/Spectrum Award for his ground-breaking story about homosexuality, “The World Well Lost.” For the influence on comic books of his short story “It,” he won the Inkpot Award. His idea of “bleshing” (the interaction of different individuals in a gestalt from *More Than Human*) was influential for the art of performers from The Grateful Dead to the Blue Man Group. He was known for the creation of Sturgeon’s Law (Every genre, without exception, is 90 percent crap) and the credo “Ask the next question.” For his lifetime of work, he was awarded a World Fantasy Achievement Award, and, in 2000, was inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame.

THE NOVELS OF THEODORE STURGEON

FROM OPEN ROAD MEDIA



“ONE OF THE GREATEST . . . I CAN’T RECOMMEND HIS WORK TOO HIGHLY!”

—STEPHEN KING

AVAILABLE WHEREVER EBOOKS ARE SOLD

OPEN  ROAD
INTEGRATED MEDIA